

AFC QUARTERLY

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE ASIAN FOOTBALL CONFEDERATION

ISSUE 25



**AFC
ASIAN CUP
UAE 2019™**

AFC ASIAN CUP UAE 2019

An in-depth look at the 24
teams participating at the
continental tournament

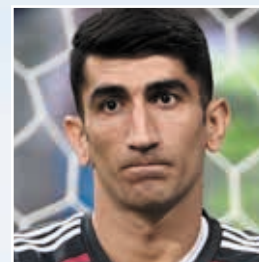
ISSUE
25

January 2019

PLUS

**MILOS
DEGENEK**

Defender wants
Socceroos to
dominate Asian
football



**ALIREZA
BEIRANVAND**

IR Iran goalkeeper
targets AFC Asian Cup title



BASHAR RESAN

Iraq midfielder takes
inspiration from the golden
generation of 2007 ahead
of his first AFC Asian Cup.



PHIL YOUNGHUSBAND

After the Philippines qualified for
their maiden AFC Asian Cup, the
striker looks forward to competing
with the continent's elite.



THITIPAN PUANGCHAN

The War Elephants midfielder
is aiming to go deep into the
tournament in the United Arab
Emirates.



Gallery

Full House Final

A record-breaking crowd of 100,000 football fans packed the stands at Azadi Stadium in Tehran to watch Persepolis face Kashima Antlers in the AFC Champions League final on November 10.



muscat 2018

ONE ASIA • ONE GOAL



.....
Best In Class
.....

Asian Football Confederation prize winners lined up for the cameras after winning their respective accolades at the prestigious AFC Annual Awards gala in Muscat, Oman, at the end of November.



Abdulkarim Hassan And Wang Shuang Win Top Awards

QATAR DEFENDER ABDULKARIM HASSAN IS NAMED THE AFC PLAYER OF THE YEAR AND CHINA PR MIDFIELDER WANG SHUANG WINS THE AFC WOMEN’S PLAYER OF THE YEAR AT AWARDS GALA IN MUSCAT.

Abdulkarim Hassan rounded off an excellent 12 months by being named the 2018 AFC Player of the Year in Muscat, Oman, at the end of November after seeing off competition from Kashima Antlers pair Yuma Suzuki and Kento Misao. The Al Sadd left-back played a vital role in his club’s advance to the 2018 AFC Champions League semi-finals and runners-up finish in the 2017-18 Qatar Stars League season. Hassan, 25, is also a key player in the Qatar national side and winning the award will boost his morale ahead of the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019. “I am very glad and proud to achieve this award,” said Hassan. “Every player in Asia

dreams of winning such an award and this is a great testament to Qatar football. “It is a great honour to be the second Qatari to win this award. Of course, I have to thank my teammates and I thank everyone who supported me in my career. “I would like to dedicate this award to the Qatar FA President, and the Qatari people. I am still just 25 years old, I have a long way to go, and I hope to build on this success. The three nominees did a great job this year.” In the women’s game, China PR’s Wang Shuang, who plays for Paris Saint-Germain in the Division 1 Féminine, claimed the award for the first time, following an impressive year at both club and international level. “It is a total honour for me to receive this precious award, I would like to thank the

AFC,” said Wang. “Of course, this has been a year of great results. To secure a move to PSG, to score in the UEFA Champions League and now to win this great award. But also, this year we played in the Asian Games and personally I do feel some regret that we were not able to do better.” The 23-year-old was part of the China PR team who finished third in the 2018 AFC Women’s Asian Cup in Jordan and played a pivotal role for the Steel Roses, scoring six goals at the 2018 Asian Games in Indonesia, where they finished second. “Football is a sport that stands for equality,” she added. “I hope that this award will remind girls in Asia that if they have a dream, they should continue to chase that dream and to turn that into reality.”



Double Delight For Japan Coaches At Awards

Japan were recognised for their coaching excellence in 2018 at November’s AFC Annual Awards when the Men’s and Women’s 2018 AFC Coach of the Year accolades were awarded to Go Oiwa and Asako Takakura respectively. Kashima Antlers’ coach Oiwa guided his side to their maiden AFC Champions League title on November 10 to pick up the men’s top coaching honour, while AFC Women’s Asian Cup Jordan 2018-winning coach Asako Takakura confirmed her legendary status in women’s football with her sixth AFC Women’s Coach of the Year award. “I feel very proud that I have this honour almost every year,” said Takakura. “But this is really for my players

and all coaches who have given so much to the game. “Of course, we aim to win the World Cup next year. And I am confident that with unity, we can make our country proud.” One who may also be a part of the 2019 FIFA Women’s World Cup is young striker Saori Takarada, who was named AFC Youth Player of the Year (Women), while Saudi Arabia’s Turki Al Ammar won the AFC Youth Player of the Year (Men). Japan also earned the Inspiring AFC Member Association of the Year, Makoto Hasebe was named AFC Asian International Player of the Year, and there was a special recognition for Futoshi Ikeda, who coached Japan’s U-20 Women side to FIFA U-20 Women’s World Cup glory last August.

- AFC Diamond of Asia: Zhang Jilong
- AFC President’s Special Recognition Award: Futoshi Ikeda; Wild Boars FC
- AFC Futsal Player of the Year: Ali Asghar Hassanzadeh
- AFC Referees Special Award: Alireza Faghani; Reza Sokhandan; Mohammadreza Mansouri
- AFC Inspiring Member Association Of The Year: Japan Football Association
- AFC Developing Member Association Of The Year: DPR Korea Football Association
- AFC Aspiring Member Association Of The Year: Mongolian Football Federation
- AFC President’s Recognition Award for Grassroots Football: China/Singapore/Palestine





Heavyweight Clashes The Highlight Of 2019 Draw

There will be a repeat of the 2018 semi-final as early as the group stage in the 2019 edition of the AFC Champions League after last year's runners-up Persepolis of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Qatar's Al Sadd were paired alongside each other in Group D of the 2019 AFC Champions League after the draw took place at AFC House in Kuala Lumpur in November.

Persepolis came out on top of the final four meeting between the two sides, but Al Sadd will not need to wait long for their re-match. The pair will be joined by Saudi Arabia's Al Ahli and a play-off winner.

Another exciting line-up is in Group C, where inaugural AFC Champions League winners Al Ain of the United Arab Emirates will face two-time continental champions Al Hilal of Saudi Arabia, Tehran heavyweights Esteghlal and Qatari powerhouse Al Duhail.

In Group A, Al Zawraa Club will make history when the Iraqi side become the first from their nation in 10 years to play in the AFC Champions League. They will face Emirati side Al Wasl and two play-off winners.

Two-time winners Al Ittihad of Saudi Arabia also return to the AFC Champions League and are in Group B alongside Al Wahda of the UAE, Uzbek champions Lokomotiv and a play-off winner.

In the East, Group H sees three national champions drawn together. J.League winners Kawasaki Frontale, A-League champions Sydney FC and China's current domestic kings Shanghai SIPG. The trio will be joined by a play-off winner.

Meanwhile, two-time continental champions Guangzhou Evergrande are in Group F along with Australia's Melbourne Victory and Korean FA Cup winners Daegu FC and another side to come through the play-offs.

Winners of the tournament in 2006 and 2016, Korea Republic's Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors are in Group G alongside 2017 champions Urawa Red Diamonds of Japan, China FA Cup winners Beijing Guoan and Thailand's Buriram United.

Finally, Malaysia's Johor Darul Ta'zim make their long-awaited AFC Champions League bow in Group E, and will face Korea Republic's Gyeongnam FC and two play-off winners.

All remaining places for the 2019 AFC Champions League will be decided following the preliminary and play-off rounds in February, ahead of the group stage, which kicks off on March 4.

Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D	Group E	Group F	Group G	Group H
Al Wasl	Al Ittihad	Al Duhail SC	Persepolis	Gyeongnam FC	Guangzhou Evergrande	Urawa Red Diamonds	Sydney FC
Al Zawraa Club	Al Wahda	Al Hilal	Al Sadd	Johor Darul Ta'zim	Daegu FC	Beijing Guoan	Kawasaki Frontale
Play-off Winner	Lokomotiv	Al Ain	Al Ahli Saudi	Play-off Winner	Melbourne Victory	Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors	Shanghai SIPG
Play-off Winner	Play-off Winner	Esteghlal FC	Play-off Winner	Play-off Winner	Play-off Winner	Buriram United	Play-off Winner





A New Champion Will Be Crowned

After completing their hat-trick of AFC Cup titles last year, Air Force Club will instead be taking part in this year's AFC Champions League meaning come November 2019 there will be a new champion of the AFC Cup for the first time since 2016.

Runners-up last year, Altyr Asyr return and are drawn in Group D – the Central Zone – where they will face Dordoi FC of Kyrgyz Republic, either FC Istiklol or FC Pagar-Tadaz of Tajikistan and a play-off winner.

In the West Zone, former winners Qadsia SC of Kuwait return to the tournament in Group C along with Lebanon's Al Ahed, Bahrain's Malkiya Club and Al Suwaiq of Oman.

Syria's Al Ittihad, who won the seventh edition of the AFC Cup in 2010, are in Group B alongside Bahrain's Al Najma, Kuwait SC or Kazma SC (both Kuwait) and Al Jazeera of Jordan.

Completing the West Zone is Group A which contains Al Jaish of Syria, champions in 2004, Lebanon's Al Nejme, Al Wehdat or Al Faisaly (Jordan) and a play-off winner.

In the South Zone, Minerva Punjab of India are placed in Group E alongside Bangladesh's Abahani Limited Dhaka, a club from Nepal and a side that progresses through the play-offs.

Moving further east, Group F is the first of three ASEAN Zone groups and pairs together Tampines Rovers of Singapore, Yangon United or Zwegapin United of Myanmar, Hanoi FC of Vietnam and Cambodian club Nagaworld.

The Philippines' Ceres Negros or Davao Aguilas will take to the stage in Group G, where they will meet Vietnam's Becamex Binh Duong, Myanmar's Shan United and a team from Indonesia.

In Group H, Home United of Singapore are matched with Kaya FC of the Philippines, Laos' Lao Toyota FC and Indonesian side PSM Makassar.

In the East Zone, DPR Korea's 4.25 SC and Chinese Taipei's Hang Yuen FC have been drawn in Group I alongside Kitchee SC or Hong Kong Pegasus – both of Hong Kong – and a play-off winner.

The group stage of the 2019 AFC Cup will kick off on February 25.

West Zone		Central Zone		South Zone	ASEAN Zone		East Zone	
Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D	Group E	Group F	Group G	Group H	Group I
Al Jaish	Al Najma	Al Ahed	FC Istiklol/FC Pagar-Tadaz	Minerva Punjab	Hanoi FC	Ceres Negros/Davao Aguilas	Home United	Kitchee SC/Hong Kong Pegasus
Al Nejme	Al Ittihad	Malkiya Club	Altyr Asyr	Abahani Limited Dhaka	Tampines Rovers	Becamex Binh Duong	Kaya FC	4.25 SC
Al Wehdat/Al Faisaly	Kuwait SC/Kazma SC	Al Suwaiq	Dordoi FC	Nepal 1st Club	Yangon Utd/Zwegapin Utd	Indonesia 1st/3rd Club	Lao Toyota FC	Hang Yuen FC
Play-off Winner	Al Jazeera	Qadsia SC	Play-off Winner	Play-off Winner	Nagaworld	Shan United	PSM Makassar	Play-off Winner

THE GRANDEST STAGE

THE 17TH EDITION OF THE AFC ASIAN CUP WILL BE THE TOURNAMENT'S BIGGEST YET WITH 24 TEAMS APPEARING IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES BETWEEN JANUARY 5 AND FEBRUARY 1.

James Troisi's extra-time strike four years ago in Australia handed the Socceroos their first AFC Asian Cup title, but this January, the slate is wiped clean as Asia's top 24 nations face off for the right to call themselves the winner of the continent's biggest prize.

Australia's 2015 triumph saw the Green and Gold join the roll of honour of AFC Asian Cup champions that now extends to eight nations. Of those, six will be among the contenders for the 2019 title.

Japan remain ahead of both Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia on the all-time winners' list, and the continent's three most successful nations will be joined in the United Arab Emirates by the hosts, defending champions Australia, former winners Korea Republic and Iraq as well as Bahrain, China PR, DPR Korea, India, Jordan, Kyrgyz Republic, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, the Philippines, Qatar, Syria, Thailand, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Vietnam and Yemen.

Having impressively finished third at the previous tournament, the UAE will look to turn home advantage into a maiden AFC Asian Cup title, with the Whites beginning their campaign in Group A against 2004 fourth-place side Bahrain, India and Thailand.

Group B sees holders Australia take on Syria, Palestine and Jordan, and two-time winners Korea Republic headline Group C ahead of China PR, and two debutants: Kyrgyz Republic and the Philippines.

In Group D, three-time champions IR Iran have been drawn with Iraq, Vietnam and Yemen, while Group E comprises another treble winner, Saudi Arabia, alongside Qatar, Lebanon and DPR Korea.

And finally, four-time winners Japan are drawn in Group F with Uzbekistan, Oman and Turkmenistan.

Hosts UAE will have the honour of opening the tournament against Bahrain at Abu Dhabi's Zayed Sports City Stadium on January 5, with the championship culminating 28 days later at the same venue where the winner of the continent's most coveted prize will be crowned.



Group A		Group B		Group C		Group D		Group E		Group F	
A1	UAE	B1	Australia	C1	Korea Republic	D1	IR Iran	E1	Saudi Arabia	F1	Japan
A2	Thailand	B2	Syria	C2	China PR	D2	Iraq	E2	Qatar	F2	Uzbekistan
A3	India	B3	Palestine	C3	Kyrgyz Republic	D3	Vietnam	E3	Lebanon	F3	Oman
A4	Bahrain	B4	Jordan	C4	Philippines	D4	Yemen	E4	DPR Korea	F4	Turkmenistan
UAE VS Bahrain		Australia VS Jordan		Korea Republic VS Philippines		IR Iran VS Yemen		Saudi Arabia VS DPR Korea		Japan VS Turkmenistan	
Thailand VS India		Syria VS Palestine		China PR VS Kyrgyz Republic		Iraq VS Vietnam		Qatar VS Lebanon		Uzbekistan VS Oman	
Sat Jan 5 Zayed Sports City Stadium, Abu Dhabi		Sun Jan 6 Hazza Bin Zayed Stadium, Al Ain		Mon Jan 7 Al Maktoum Stadium, Dubai		Mon Jan 7 Mohammed Bin Zayed Stadium, Abu Dhabi		Tue Jan 8 Rashid Stadium, Dubai		Wed Jan 9 Al Nahyan Stadium, Abu Dhabi	
India VS UAE		Jordan VS Syria		Kyrgyz Republic VS Korea Republic		Vietnam VS IR Iran		Lebanon VS Saudi Arabia		Oman VS Japan	
Bahrain VS Thailand		Palestine VS Australia		Philippines VS China PR		Yemen VS Iraq		DPR Korea VS Qatar		Turkmenistan VS Uzbekistan	
Thu Jan 10 Zayed Sports City Stadium, Abu Dhabi		Thu Jan 10 Khalifa Bin Zayed Stadium, Al Ain		Fri Jan 11 Hazza Bin Zayed Stadium, Al Ain		Sat Jan 12 Al Nahyan Stadium, Abu Dhabi		Sat Jan 12 Al Maktoum Stadium, Dubai		Sun Jan 13 Zayed Sports City Stadium, Abu Dhabi	
UAE VS Thailand		Australia VS Syria		Korea Republic VS China PR		IR Iran VS Iraq		Saudi Arabia VS Qatar		Japan VS Uzbekistan	
India VS Bahrain		Palestine VS Jordan		Kyrgyz Republic VS Philippines		Vietnam VS Yemen		Lebanon VS DPR Korea		Oman VS Turkmenistan	
Mon Jan 14 Hazza Bin Zayed Stadium, Al Ain		Mon Jan 15 Khalifa Bin Zayed Stadium, Al Ain		Wed Jan 16 Al Nahyan Stadium, Abu Dhabi		Wed Jan 16 Al Maktoum Stadium, Dubai		Thu Jan 17 Zayed Sports City Stadium, Abu Dhabi		Thu Jan 17 Khalifa Bin Zayed Stadium, Al Ain	
Mon Jan 14 Sharjah Stadium, Sharjah		Mon Jan 15 Mohammed Bin Zayed Stadium, Abu Dhabi		Wed Jan 16 Rashid Stadium, Dubai		Wed Jan 16 Hazza Bin Zayed Stadium, Al Ain		Thu Jan 17 Sharjah Stadium, Sharjah		Thu Jan 17 Mohammed Bin Zayed Stadium, Abu Dhabi	

Round of 16		Round of 16		Round of 16		Round of 16		Round of 16		Round of 16	
2nd Group A VS 2nd Group C		1st Group D VS 3rd Group B/E/F		1st Group B VS 3rd Group A/C/D		1st Group F VS 2nd Group E		1st Group A VS 3rd Group C/D/E		2nd Group B VS 2nd Group F	
Sun Jan 20 Hazza Bin Zayed Stadium, Al Ain		Sun Jan 20 Mohammed Bin Zayed Stadium, Abu Dhabi		Sun Jan 20 Al Maktoum Stadium, Dubai		Mon Jan 21 Sharjah Stadium, Sharjah		Mon Jan 21 Zayed Sports City Stadium, Abu Dhabi		Mon Jan 21 Khalifa Bin Zayed Stadium, Al Ain	
Quarter-Final		Quarter-Final		Quarter-Final		Quarter-Final		Quarter-Final		Quarter-Final	
VS		VS		VS		VS		VS		VS	
Thu Jan 24 Mohammed Bin Zayed Stadium, Abu Dhabi		VS		Thu Jan 24 Al Maktoum Stadium, Dubai		VS		Fri Jan 25 Hazza Bin Zayed Stadium, Al Ain		Semi-Final	
VS		VS		VS		VS		VS		VS	
Mon Jan 28 Hazza Bin Zayed Stadium, Al Ain		VS		VS		VS		VS		Tue Jan 29 Mohammed Bin Zayed Stadium, Abu Dhabi	

FINAL



**AFC
ASIAN CUP**
UAE 2019™

Friday Feb 1

Zayed Sports City Stadium, Abu Dhabi



GROUP A

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Asian Cup Record

36 Matches

12 Won

8 Drawn

16 Lost

History:

Runners-Up 1996; Third Place 2015; Fourth Place 1992; Group Stage: 2011, 2007, 2004, 1988, 1984, 1980



The United Arab Emirates have never won the AFC Asian Cup, but no other nation has come closer to Asian glory than they have without actually lifting the trophy.

As hosts in 1996, the UAE topped their group ahead of Kuwait, Korea Republic and Indonesia, before defeating Iraq in the last eight and Kuwait in the semi-finals to advance to a first continental final.

But, in front of home support in Abu Dhabi, the Emiratis lost out as regional rivals Saudi Arabia claimed the title after a 4-2 penalty shootout victory followed a scoreless draw.

After failing to qualify for the 2000 edition and exiting at the group stage in 2004, 2007 and 2011, the 2015 tournament in Australia was where the UAE excelled once again.

Local coach Mahdi Ali helmed four years ago when, after advancing from the group stage, the UAE claimed a memorable penalty shootout win over defending champions Japan in the quarter-finals. A 2-0 defeat to Ange Postecoglou's Socceroos followed in the semi-finals, before the Emiratis defeated Iraq 3-2 to claim third place and cap a memorable tournament

KEY PLAYER:

Ali Mabkhout

With playmaker Omar Abdulrahman ruled out with injury, all eyes turn to the 2015 AFC Asian Cup Top Scorer Ali Mabkhout to be the poster boy for the UAE at the 2019 edition.

While the striker has started the domestic league season in typically prolific form, the Al Jazira man will need to repeat his heroics of four years ago should the Whites wish to go all the way this time.



in which the likes of Omar Abdulrahman, Ahmed Khalil and Ali Mabkhout all shone.

Current head coach Alberto Zaccheroni, who led Japan to the 2011 AFC Asian Cup title in Qatar, will look to repeat his magic once more and steer the Whites to glory on home soil.



GROUP A

THAILAND

Asian Cup Record

20 Matches

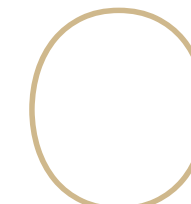
1 Won

8 Drawn

11 Lost

History:

Third Place 1972; Group Stage 2007, 2004, 2000, 1996, 1992



ne of the most improved sides in Asia over the last few years, Thailand have risen from a regional superpower in Southeast Asia, where the War Elephants have dominated the AFF (ASEAN Football Federation) Championship, to become a serious player on the continental scene.

In the qualifying campaign for the 2018 FIFA World Cup, Thailand made it to the final round for the first time since 2002, and earned impressive draws against both Australia and the United Arab Emirates in the process.

Serbian coach Milovan Rajevac will now be aiming to take their game to the next level, and will look to add some defensive stability to a team more known for its exciting attacking prowess than rearguard steel.

What will be pleasing for Rajevac is the number of his players now opting to play abroad, with all three of Chanathip Songkrasin, Teerasil Dangda and Theerathon Bunmathan challenging themselves in Japan's J.League with Consadole Sapporo, Sanfrecce Hiroshima and Vissel Kobe respectively, while goalkeeper Kawin Thamsatchanan made the move to OH

KEY PLAYER:

Chanathip Songkrasin

Few players in Asia generate excitement when on the ball quite like Thailand's tricky forward Chanathip Songkrasin. The Japan-based 25-year-old has impressed in both the AFC Champions League and the J.League over the past two years and his next task will be to inspire his country to a strong showing in the UAE.



Leuven in Belgium's second division.

The experienced quartet form the backbone of this Thai national side, and in an expanded 24-team tournament they will be targeting a spot in the knockout rounds for the first time since they hosted the competition and finished third back in 1972.



GROUP A INDIA

Asian Cup Record

10 Matches
2 Won
1 Drawn
7 Lost

History:

Runners-Up 1964; Group Stage 2011, 1984



Stephen Constantine's men will be making just their fourth appearance at the AFC Asian Cup, and while they don't have an extensive history in the tournament, they did come close to winning the third edition of the competition in 1964, finishing as runners-up in the four-team round robin tournament.

In 2019 they will be looking to go one better than their group stage exit in their last appearance in 2011, when they qualified as the winner of the 2008 AFC Challenge Cup.

On that occasion they were dealt a tough draw when they were pitted alongside Australia, Korea Republic and Bahrain, and in the end the challenge proved too much as the Blue Tigers suffered defeat in all three matches.

The improvement from India since that tournament, however, has been profound and under Constantine, who was appointed in 2015, they came through AFC Asian Cup qualifying as one of Asia's most in-form teams, going on a 13-match unbeaten run between March 2016 and March 2017, before defeat to Kyrgyz Republic.

The experienced Englishman has moulded a team that mixes experience and youth, with

KEY PLAYER:

Sunil Chhetri

A legend of Indian football, Sunil Chhetri boasts more caps and more goals than any other player for the South Asian country. The man for the big occasion scored crucial goals in the third round of qualifying as India advanced to a first AFC Asian Cup since 2011, when the striker netted twice in three games.



many of the side aged 25 or under.

The leader of the team is undoubtedly one of the experienced heads, JSW Bengaluru marksman Sunil Chhetri, who is one of just two players remaining from the 2011 squad alongside his club teammate Gurpreet Singh.



GROUP A BAHRAIN

Asian Cup Record

19 Matches
4 Won
5 Drawn
10 Lost

History:

Fourth Place 2004; Group Stage 2015, 2011, 2007, 1988



Since winning FIFA's most improved team award in 2004 after their fourth-place finish in that year's AFC Asian Cup, Bahrain have qualified for every continental competition since and will appear in their fifth successive tournament in the United Arab Emirates.

In 2004, Bahrain drew with hosts China before a 3-1 victory over Indonesia secured a place in the quarter-finals on what was only their second appearance in the competition, having also qualified for the 1988 edition.

Bahrain recorded a famous 2-1 victory over Korea Republic in 2007, but were eliminated at the group stage by a solitary point. The West Asians defeated India in 2011 and then claimed a memorable win over Qatar in 2015, but again fell short of reaching the quarter-finals.

Current boss Miroslav Soukup moved to Bahrain in 2016 after a two-year stint with Yemen. The Czech led the Reds to the semi-finals of the 2017 Gulf Cup and earned Bahrain a place in the 2019 AFC Asian Cup after topping their qualifying group.

On the pitch, creative midfielder Jamal Rashid has been in fine form for his country

KEY PLAYER:

Jamal Rashid

Midfielder Jamal Rashid plays a key role in the centre of the park for the West Asians, creating opportunities for his teammates as well as making bursting runs into the box. The side's designated penalty taker scored twice at the 2017 Gulf Cup as Bahrain reached the semi-finals and he will be crucial if they are to advance in UAE 2019.



over the past year, while the attack will be led by veteran Ismail Abdullatif, who has over 40 goals for Bahrain.

Soukup will also be encouraged by the scoring form of Isa Al Bari who was the star of Malkiya Club's unlikely rise to the summit of the Bahraini League and subsequent impressive AFC Cup debut.



AUSTRALIA

GROUP B

AUSTRALIA

Asian Cup Record

16 Matches

10 Won

3 Drawn

3 Lost

History:

Champions 2015; Runners-Up 2011; Quarter-Finals 2007



Australia will be looking to defend their AFC Asian Cup crown after they won their first continental title on home soil in 2015, following an extra-time 2-1 victory over Korea Republic at Stadium Australia in Sydney.

Australia excelled in front of home support under former coach Ange Postecoglou and the Socceroos saw a series of stand-out performances from their stars including tournament MVP Massimo Luongo.

In the final it was midfielder James Troisi, on as a substitute, who proved the hero when he popped up with a 105th-minute winner to seal victory for the Green and Gold.

There's a new figure in the dugout as Graham Arnold is back in charge of the national team after he guided the Socceroos to a quarter-final appearance in their first ever AFC Asian Cup back in 2007.

On that occasion it was Japan that ended Australia's campaign with a penalty shootout victory in the last eight after Australia had struggled in the group stage, and it was the Samurai Blue who again, in 2011, denied Australia their first AFC Asian Cup title after Tadanari Lee's spectacular extra-time winner

KEY PLAYER:

Mathew Leckie

If Australia are to retain their continental crown, Mathew Leckie will likely play a big part as the Germany-based wide forward has developed into a key figure for the Socceroos over the past couple of years. Leckie has the ability to deliver pin-point crosses from the right and was one of his country's standout performers at the FIFA World Cup Russia 2018.



in the final saw Japan lift the trophy.

Key to Australia's campaign for back-to-back titles in 2019 will be Hertha Berlin forward Mathew Leckie, who has excelled in the German Bundesliga, Brighton & Hove Albion goalkeeper Mat Ryan and stylish Celtic midfielder Tom Rogic.



GROUP B

SYRIA

Asian Cup Record

18 Matches

7 Won

2 Drawn

9 Lost

History:

Group Stage: 2011, 1996, 1988, 1984, 1980



Syria have appeared in five previous AFC Asian Cup tournaments and, after missing out in 2015, return off the back of grabbing global headlines in the 2018 FIFA World Cup qualifying campaign.

The Qasioun Eagles' hopes lie on the shoulders of a generation led by the 2017 AFC Player of the Year Omar Khribin and prolific all-action forward Omar Al Soma.

The latter's last-minute free-kick came within inches of earning Syria an equaliser that would have put them within 180 minutes of the 2018 FIFA World Cup. Instead it rattled the post and a historic qualifying campaign came to an end with a 3-2 aggregate defeat at the hands of Australia in the play-off stage after the Syrians had earlier defied all odds to finish third in their group.

Syria qualified for their first AFC Asian Cup in Kuwait in 1980 when wins against Bangladesh and China PR in addition to a draw against the Islamic Republic of Iran was an impressive debut that saw them narrowly miss out on a place in the semi-finals.

The West Asians managed four wins

KEY PLAYER:

Omar Khribin

The 2017 AFC Player of the Year Omar Khribin was the first Syrian to win the award. His ten goals in the 2018 FIFA World Cup qualifiers took the Eagles of Qasioun into the play-off against Australia. Syrian fans will be looking for the 24-year-old's partnership with Omar Al Soma to deliver the goals as they aim to progress past the group stage for the first time in their history.



in their three subsequent appearances between 1984 and 1996 but failed to make it beyond the group stage, before a memorable 2-1 victory over Saudi Arabia in the 2011 group stage proved the highlight of their most recent showing on the continent's biggest stage.



GROUP B

PALESTINE

Asian Cup Record

3 Matches

0 Won

0 Drawn

3 Lost

History:

Group Stage 2015



Palestine made history in May 2014 when Ashraf Numan scored to defeat the Philippines 1-0 in the final of the AFC Challenge Cup and qualify for the AFC Asian Cup for the first time in their history.

The West Asians had previously reached the quarter-finals of the 2006 AFC Challenge Cup and finished fourth in 2012 before the 2014 victory capped a steady improvement over the past decade.

Drawn in a tough group in 2015 alongside former winners Japan and Iraq, as well as neighbours Jordan, Palestine suffered three defeats from three, but gained valuable experience along the way.

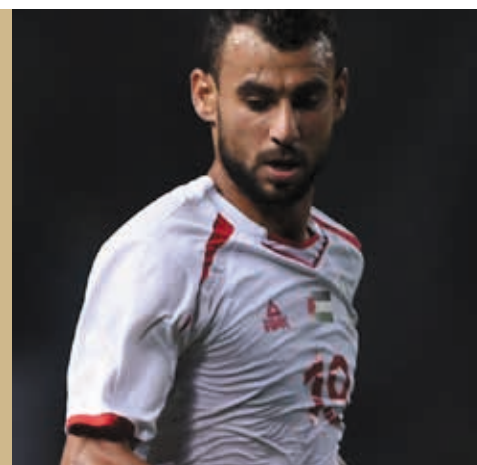
What followed was a strong showing in the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 qualifying campaign when they were seconds away from drawing with Saudi Arabia and then did tie with the United Arab Emirates on route to advancing to the third round of qualifiers.

Palestine then stormed to qualification after winning their first four games, including a superb 2-1 victory over Oman in Al Ram, to secure their passage to the Emirates. A narrow 1-0 defeat in Oman meant their West

KEY PLAYER:

Sameh Maraaba

Sameh Maraaba was Palestine's top scorer in the 2019 AFC Asian Cup qualifying campaign. His seven goals included four in the 8-1 victory over Maldives. The 26-year-old also netted a brace against Malaysia, and will be looking to help Palestine get their maiden win in the AFC Asian Cup, in their second participation, in 2019.



Asian rivals finished marginally ahead in the final standings, but Palestine advance to the continental competition as a side on the rise.

Back among the continent's elite for the second time, Palestine will aim to continue their recent improvement and gain their first points at the continental competition.



GROUP B

JORDAN

Asian Cup Record

11 Matches

4 Won

4 Drawn

3 Lost

History:

Quarter-Finals 2011, 2004;
Group Stage 2015



Jordan don't have to look back too far to find inspiration for success at UAE 2019 as they will be aiming to match, or better, the feats of the sides that reached the quarter-finals in 2004 and 2011.

Jordan had never featured in an AFC Asian Cup until 2004 but advanced all the way to the last eight in their first appearance under the late Egyptian coach Mahmoud El Gohary.

The West Asians showed unwavering defensive toughness, emerging as runners-up in their group without conceding a single goal after 0-0 draws against Korea Republic and the UAE and a 2-0 win against Kuwait.

Another strong campaign in Qatar in 2011 saw Jordan again progress to the quarter-finals with an unbeaten record in the group stage, drawing against eventual champions Japan and beating 2007 runners-up Saudi Arabia, before narrowly losing 2-1 to Uzbekistan in the quarter-finals.

Musa Al Taamari performed admirably for Jordan at the AFC U23 Championship China 2018 and now plays a key role for the senior side. The striker is well supported by playmaker Yaseen Al Bakhit, who will

KEY PLAYER:

Musa Al Taamari

The young hope of Jordanian football, Musa Al Taamari's goals fired Amman club Al Jazeera into the latter rounds of the 2018 AFC Cup before earning him a move to Cypriot side APOEL. The 21-year-old oozes confidence, has bags of pace and, with an excellent left foot, is a threat from both inside and outside the box.



be familiar with the host venues having played in the UAE Pro League since 2016.

Goalkeeper Amer Shafi, meanwhile, has played in all three of Jordan's AFC Asian Cup campaigns and, with more than 140 caps, is arguably the country's most legendary player.



GROUP C

KOREA REPUBLIC

Asian Cup Record

62 Matches

32 Won

16 Drawn

14 Lost

History:

Champions 1960, 1956;
Runners-Up 2015, 1988,
1980, 1972; Third Place
2011, 2007, 2000, 1964;
Quarter-Finals 2004, 1996;
Group Stage 1984



Korea Republic will be determined to go one step further after suffering a heartbreaking defeat in the 2015 AFC Asian Cup final. An extra-time goal from Australia midfielder James Troisi was enough to end the Taeguk Warriors' hopes of a first continental championship since the second edition of the competition, some 58 years ago, and see the Socceroos lift their maiden title on home soil.

The result saw Korea Republic finish a record fourth time as runners-up, but there is no doubt that coach Paulo Bento's talent-filled side have the quality to end over half a century of hurt.

Chief among their arsenal is Tottenham Hotspur star forward Son Heung-min. The 26-year-old, the most expensive Asian player in history, has smashed continental scoring records since joining the Premier League giants and is considered by many to be the best currently active player from Asia.

Playing his football in the same league as Son, Ki Sung-yueng continues to excel in midfield for Newcastle United, while there is further exciting young talent playing their trade

KEY PLAYER:

Son Heung-min

Asia's most expensive export Son Heung-min will be the man Korea Republic hope can drive them towards a first continental title since 1960. Arguably the continent's best player, Son is developing into a global star at Tottenham Hotspur and the forward will look to make up for losing the 2015 final to Australia.



in Europe in Hellas Verona midfielder Lee Seung-woo and Hamburg SV forward Hwang Hee-chan.

Since taking over after the 2018 FIFA World Cup, Bento has achieved some impressive results in friendly matches, but at UAE 2019 he and Korea Republic will be looking for the ultimate continental prize.



GROUP C

CHINA PR

Asian Cup Record

51 Matches

20 Won

13 Drawn

18 Lost

History:

Runners-Up 2004, 1984;
Third Place 1992, 1976;
Fourth Place 2000, 1988;
Quarter-Finals 2015, 1996;
Group Stage 2011, 2007,
1980



With FIFA World Cup-winning coach Marcello Lippi in charge, a lot will be expected of China heading into the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019.

A positive foundation was built at the 2015 AFC Asian Cup in Australia when they made it to the quarter-finals, where they were defeated by the home nation after a Tim Cahill double secured a 2-0 scoreline.

While they have yet to taste success on the continental stage, undoubtedly their best performance came when they hosted the tournament in 2004. Topping Group A with two wins and a draw, two Zheng Zhi penalties helped them to a 3-0 win over Iraq in the last eight, setting up a showdown with the Islamic Republic of Iran in the semi-final.

After the scores were locked at 1-1 at the end of extra-time, Liu Yunfei was the hero for the home side, saving Yahya Golmohammadi's spot-kick to send China into a final with regional rivals Japan, although it was the Samurai Blue who came out on top following a 3-1 win.

Remarkably, Guangzhou Evergrande's

KEY PLAYER:

Wu Lei

Set to make his second appearance in the competition, Wu Lei will be among China's main threats in front of goal. The speedy forward is part of an exhilarating frontline at Shanghai SIPG and will be a force to be reckoned with if his club form can be replicated in the UAE.



veteran midfielder Zheng, named in the Team of the Tournament in 2004, remains a key member of the side 14 years later, but it is the new generation of talent – the likes of exciting young forwards Wu Lei, Zhang Yuning and Wei Shihao – that China will be looking to for success in 2019.



GROUP C

KYRGYZ REPUBLIC

Asian Cup Record

Debutants



Kyrgyz Republic are appearing in their first AFC Asian Cup after a comprehensive 5-1 victory over Myanmar last March confirmed the Group A runners-up spot in the third round of qualifying.

A long journey to the United Arab Emirates began with a 3-1 victory over Bangladesh in the second round of qualifiers in June 2015. The Central Asians eventually finished third in their group behind Australia and Jordan, but ahead of Tajikistan and Bangladesh to gain automatic passage into the third round of qualifiers.

Drawn in a four-team group with India, Myanmar and Macau, Kyrgyz Republic started with a 1-0 victory over Macau, before a 1-0 defeat to eventual group winners India. A 2-2 draw in Myanmar followed after being two goals up, but the Central Asians recovered to beat Macau 4-3 and move into second place in the standings.

With Kyrgyz Republic and Myanmar in a battle for second place, the sides faced off in their penultimate games, but the Southeast Asians were no match for them as Anton Zemlianukhin netted twice in a 5-1 win.

KEY PLAYER:

Anton Zemlianukhin

Six goals in Kyrgyz Republic's final four AFC Asian Cup qualifiers marked Anton Zemlianukhin as the Central Asians' standout performer.

The 30-year-old striker's goals helped his country claim 10 points from 12, including winning their final three qualification games, to secure a tournament debut at the AFC Asian Cup.



A victory over India in their final Group A game could have seen the Central Asians finish on top of the standings, but India's late goal in the 2-1 win for Kyrgyz Republic ensured the South Asians stayed marginally ahead on goal difference as the teams ended on the same points.



GROUP C

PHILIPPINES

Asian Cup Record

Debutants



The Philippines will be one of three teams making their AFC Asian Cup debut in 2019.

The improvement in the fortunes of the Azkals over the last decade has been remarkable. Regionally in the AFF (ASEAN Football Federation) Championship, they won only one of 21 matches between 1996 and 2007 (losing 19 and drawing just one) and did not qualify for the 2008 tournament.

But gradually their fortunes have improved, and they made the semi-finals in three successive tournaments in 2010, 2012 and 2014.

The turnaround in form has coincided with their policy of reaching out to the Filipino diaspora around the world, something that has seen the likes of Spain-born Javier Patino, Australia-born Iain Ramsay and England-born Neil Etheridge earn call-ups to play for the Azkals, adding important international experience to the side.

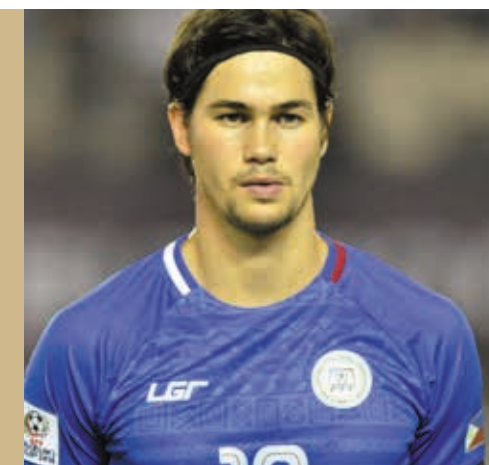
Impressively for a team not known for its success on the continent, the Philippines went through the third round of qualifying undefeated, with another of their diaspora, England-born Phil Younghusband, playing a key role.

KEY PLAYER:

Phil Younghusband

It was Phil Younghusband's 50th goal for the Philippines that sealed his country's maiden AFC Asian Cup appearance.

The prolific striker, 31, has been part of the Philippines set-up for more than a decade and netted four times in the final round of qualifying as the Southeast Asians joined the continent's elite for the first time.



The 30-year-old, who is the all-time record goalscorer for the Philippines and whose brother James also plays for the national team, scored five of his side's 13 goals throughout qualifying, including his 50th goal for his country in a 2-1 final-day win over Tajikistan to confirm qualification.



GROUP D IR IRAN

Asian Cup Record

62 Matches
37 Won
18 Drawn
7 Lost

History:

Champions 1976, 1972, 1968; Third Place 2004, 1996, 1988, 1980; Fourth Place 1984; Quarter-Finals 2015, 2011, 2007, 2000; Group Stage 1992



Given the Islamic Republic of Iran's success in qualifying for four of the last six FIFA World Cup tournaments, it's hard to believe they haven't tasted continental success since 1976.

Team Melli have won the tournament on three previous occasions in three successive editions between 1968 and 1976, with two of those (1968 and 1976) coming at home.

However, they have been knocked out in the quarter-finals in the last three competitions, twice by Korea Republic, in 2007 and 2011, and most memorably by regional rivals Iraq in Canberra in 2015, when they came from behind on three occasions before losing 7-6 in a thrilling penalty shootout.

Since then, Iran have firmly established themselves among the best teams in Asia under coach Carlos Queiroz, and they enter the tournament as one of the favourites to go all the way.

In qualifying for the 2018 FIFA World Cup they swept all before them by going undefeated in all 18 matches, and showed

KEY PLAYER:

Alireza Jahanbakhsh

After an outstanding season at Netherlands club AZ Alkmaar, exciting wide forward Alireza Jahanbakhsh made the step up to the English Premier League with a big money move to Brighton & Hove Albion. Iran's mean defence stole the headlines in qualifying but much will rest on attackers like Jahanbakhsh if a first title since 1976 is to be achieved.



their defensive strength by conceding just five goals. But it's in attack where their true strengths lie, and Queiroz has at his disposal some of Asia's finest attacking talent including England-based pair Alireza Jahanbakhsh and Karim Ansarifard, Russia-based striker Sardar Azmoun and Al Gharafa forward Mehdi Taremi.



GROUP D IRAQ

Asian Cup Record

35 Matches
13 Won
7 Drawn
15 Lost

History:

Champions 2007; Fourth Place 2015, 1976; Quarter-Finals 2011, 2004, 2000, 1996; Group Stage 1972



Iraq stunned the world with their historic victory at the 2007 AFC Asian Cup when Younis Mahmoud headed home to defeat Saudi Arabia 1-0 in the final in Jakarta as the war-torn nation claimed a first continental title.

The Lions of Mesopotamia will have hopes of repeating that feat, after performing well in the latter stages of the 2018 FIFA World Cup qualifiers and boasting stars such as Italy-based Ali Adnan and several players who have won multiple AFC Cup titles with Air Force Club.

Iraq have reached two semi-finals and four quarter-finals in the competition, but it was their story in 2007 in Southeast Asia that remains their crowning glory.

Topping a group comprising Australia, Thailand and Oman, they then beat Vietnam 2-0 in the quarter-finals and overcame Korea Republic on penalties in the semi-finals, before Mahmoud's header against the Saudis in the final sealed a 1-0 win.

In 2011, Iraq were eliminated in the quarter-finals after a 118th-minute Australia winner, before another memorable performance followed in 2015. After again reaching the quarter-finals, the

KEY PLAYER:

Ahmed Yasin

Unlike most of his teammates, Ahmed Yasin has spent nearly his entire career playing abroad. The forward was born in Baghdad but grew up in Sweden where he has been playing since the age of 16, bar a short spell in Qatar.

Capable of playing as a central striker or on either flank, Yasin's versatility has helped him rack up over 50 caps for the Lions of Mesopotamia since making his debut in 2012.



West Asians were involved in one of the games of the tournament when they defeated neighbours the Islamic Republic of Iran on penalties following a thrilling 3-3 draw. However, they were then eliminated by eventual runners-up Korea Republic in the semi-finals.



GROUP D

VIETNAM

Asian Cup Record

4 Matches

1 Won

1 Drawn

2 Lost

History:

Quarter-Finals 2007



The 2019 AFC Asian Cup marks a return to the continental competition for Vietnam for the first time since they co-hosted the tournament with Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand in 2007. Their only other appearances on the grandest stage came in the first two editions – in 1956 and 1960 – when they were entered as South Vietnam.

Spurred on by a vociferous home crowd 11 years ago, the Golden Stars had a big 2-0 win in their opening match against the United Arab Emirates, and followed it up with a 1-1 draw against Qatar.

While they lost to Japan in their final group stage match, the four points were enough for a spot in the quarter-finals. But Vietnam then ran into a red-hot Iraq, who would go on to win their first AFC Asian Cup, as the Southeast Asians' tournament ended in the last eight after a 2-0 defeat.

While they are relatively inexperienced at senior level on the continental stage, their U-23 side grabbed the headlines at the AFC U23 Championship in China in January, reaching the final before losing 2-1 to Uzbekistan after extra-time.

KEY PLAYER:

Nguyen Quang Hai

Nguyen Quang Hai has been the standout player in a talented young generation of Vietnam players and was the creative spark of a side that reached the 2018 AFC U23 Championship final.

With a wand of a left foot, the 21-year-old is a danger from distance and from set-pieces, and UAE 2019 could be where the young starlet makes his mark on the grandest stage.



With former Korea Republic international Park Hang-seo in the dugout, the core of that U-23 side will form the nucleus of the team that travels to the UAE in January 2019, spearheaded by exciting attacking duo Nguyen Cong Phuong and Nguyen Quang Hai, and dynamic midfielder Luong Xuan Truong.



GROUP D

YEMEN

Asian Cup Record

Debutants



Yemen will make their maiden appearance at the AFC Asian Cup after finishing second in their qualifying group following an unbeaten campaign.

The West Asians progressed to the third round of qualifying after overcoming the Maldives in a play-off round, before being paired in a group with the Philippines, Tajikistan and Nepal.

An opening-day 2-1 victory over the Tajiks – in which Ala Al Sasi scored the decisive goal that would eventually prove crucial – was followed by four successive draws ahead of their final group game with Nepal.

Yemen and Tajikistan went into the last game level on seven points, but the Central Asians' defeat in the Philippines meant Yemen's qualification was already secured, by virtue of a better head-to-head record, before a 2-1 win over the Nepalese rounded off their campaign in style.

In the 2011 qualifying campaign, Yemen ran eventual champions Japan close home and away, suffering a 2-1 defeat in East Asia before losing a 2-0 lead in Sanaa to end up on the wrong end of a 3-2 scoreline. They also recorded wins over Hong Kong and Bahrain

KEY PLAYER:

Ala Al Sasi

After the retirement of Yemen's all-time top goalscorer Ali Al Nono, Ala Al Sasi took on the mantle as the nation's talisman. After an experiment in the Iraqi league in 2013, the playmaker's second stint abroad saw him join Qatari side Al Sailiyah where he currently plies his trade.



but ultimately failed to advance.

After being unable to make an impact in the 2015 qualifiers, Yemen came back strongly this time round as a highly impressive unbeaten campaign in the third round culminated in their historic achievement of progressing to the United Arab Emirates.



GROUP E

SAUDI ARABIA

Asian Cup Record

44 Matches

19 Won

13 Drawn

12 Lost

History:

Champions 1996, 1988, 1984; Runners-Up 2007, 2000, 1992; Group Stage: 2015, 2011, 2004



Saudi Arabia are one of the most decorated nations in Asian football history, with three AFC Asian Cup titles to their name. The Green Falcons dominated continental football in the 1980s and 1990s, making five consecutive final appearances. Saudi Arabia also appeared in every edition of the FIFA World Cup between 1994 and 2006, but the 21st century brought a decline, with one runners-up finish in 2007 the only bright spot amid three disappointing AFC Asian Cup performances.

Saudi Arabia have failed to qualify from the group stage in three of their last four AFC Asian Cup appearances, but the United Arab Emirates brings back good memories for the Saudis, who beat their Emirati hosts in the 1996 final to lift their third and, to date, last title.

Since their disappointment at the 2015 AFC Asian Cup with Cosmin Olariu at the helm, things have begun to look brighter for Saudi Arabia, who focused on qualifying for the 2018 FIFA World Cup with Bert van Marwijk in charge.

Indeed, they succeeded, only for van Marwijk to depart after their qualification. He was

KEY PLAYER:

Abdullah Otayf

One of several footballing brothers, Abdullah Otayf has arguably outshone his siblings and become one of Saudi Arabia's key players, excelling at the 2018 FIFA World Cup. The cultured midfielder is tidy in possession and capable of operating in a holding role or as a playmaker. The Al Hilal man is a favourite of Juan Antonio Pizzi and has been an ever-present for the Green Falcons under the Argentine.



replaced by Edgardo Bauza then Juan Antonio Pizzi soon after.

The Argentine oversaw a mixed FIFA World Cup campaign at Russia 2018, with a demoralising defeat to the hosts followed by positive performances against Uruguay and Egypt, but now all eyes will be on a rise back to the fore of Asian football at UAE 2019.



GROUP E

QATAR

Asian Cup Record

32 Matches

6 Won

11 Drawn

15 Lost

History:

Quarter-Finals 2011, 2000; Group Stage: 2015, 2007, 2004, 1992, 1988, 1984, 1980



Qatar have made nine appearances in the AFC Asian Cup and have hosted the competition on two occasions, with their best performances coming when they reached the quarter-finals in 2000 and 2011.

When Qatar hosted the competition for the first time, in 1988, they defeated the United Arab Emirates and Japan, but failed to overcome Korea Republic and the Islamic Republic of Iran, finishing third in the group and exiting at the first hurdle.

This time, it will be Felix Sanchez who will lead Qatar into the competition. The Spanish head coach has tasted both glory and disappointment in Asian competitions. In 2014, Sanchez led Qatar to the AFC U-19 Championship title in Myanmar to qualify for the 2015 FIFA U-20 World Cup.

Two years later, Sanchez took a team composed of largely the same group of players to the 2016 AFC U23 Championship on home soil, but their campaign ended in heartbreak as they finished fourth and failed to qualify for the 2016 Olympic Games.

Then, at the beginning of 2018, Sanchez's U-23s went one better to finish third at the AFC

KEY PLAYER:

Akram Afif

The 22-year-old playmaker burst onto the scene in 2014, helping Qatar win the AFC U-19 Championship. Akram Afif hails from a footballing family; his father played and coached in the Qatari League and his brother, Ali, is also a Qatari international.

Capable of playing centrally or on either flank, Afif currently plies his trade at Al Sadd, having previously represented Eupen in Belgium and Sporting Gijon in Spain.



U23 Championship in China.

In 2015, Mahdi Ali led a generation of United Arab Emirates players he had coached from U-19 upwards to their best ever AFC Asian Cup finish on foreign soil. Sanchez will take inspiration as he looks to emulate the success of Qatar's neighbours with a squad that he knows inside out.



GROUP E

LEBANON

Asian Cup Record

3 Matches

0 Won

2 Drawn

1 Lost

History:

Group Stage 2000



Lebanon will be entering the AFC Asian Cup for only the second time in their history when they arrive in the United Arab Emirates in January 2019.

Their only appearance came 18 years ago, when they hosted the tournament in 2000. Having only played three AFC Asian Cup fixtures, Lebanon will be looking to improve on their record which saw them exit the home tournament without a win.

The Cedars finished last in a group which featured the Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq and Thailand, but gained commendable draws against Iraq and Thailand after a 4-0 defeat at the hands of Iran.

Former Nejmech star Abbas Chahrour had the honour of scoring Lebanon's first ever goal in the tournament, with a 28th-minute strike against Iraq, before another Nejmech icon, Moussa Hojeij, scored the equaliser to make it 2-2 and help Lebanon gain their first point in the continental competition.

Lebanon came agonisingly close to qualifying for the 2015 AFC Asian Cup, only missing out on goal difference to China PR. As a result, the Cedars parted way with

KEY PLAYER:

Hassan Maatouk

As Lebanon take part in their maiden AFC Asian Cup away from home, Hassan Maatouk will be familiar with his surroundings, having spent five years playing for UAE sides Ajman and Fujairah.

The left-footed forward returned to Lebanon in 2017, joining Nejmech. Maatouk netted seven times in qualifying, including in five of Lebanon's six games in the third round.



then coach Giuseppe Giannini and recruited Miodrag Radulovic.

Three years on, the Montenegrin has delivered for the West Asians and with stars such as Hassan Maatouk, Soony Saad and Joan Oumari, Lebanon have every chance of making a statement in 2019.



GROUP E

DPR KOREA

Asian Cup Record

15 Matches

3 Won

2 Drawn

10 Lost

History:

Fourth Place 1980; Group Stage 2015, 2011, 1992



DPR Korea secured their fifth appearance at the AFC Asian Cup following a 2-0 victory over Hong Kong in Pyongyang last March that saw them finish second in a group comprising Lebanon, Hong Kong and Malaysia.

Having reached the semi-finals on their debut appearance in 1980 in Kuwait before being eliminated after two late Korea Republic goals, DPR Korea exited at the group stage but claimed an impressive 1-1 draw with eventual champions Japan in their 1992 campaign.

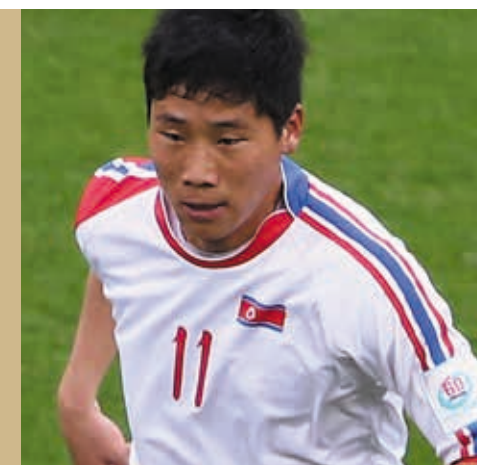
The finest moment in DPR Korea's recent footballing history came in qualifying for the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa, where they performed admirably in a narrow 2-1 defeat to Brazil.

But their most famous showing was at the 1966 FIFA World Cup in England when Pak Do-ik scored the only goal of the game in a stunning 1-0 victory over Italy to advance to the quarter-finals at the Italians' expense. DPR Korea then led 3-0 against Portugal in the last eight, only to lose 5-3 in another classic encounter that is still talked about to this day.

KEY PLAYER:

Jong Il-gwan

In the absence of 2018 AFC Cup top scorer An Il-bom, attacker Jong Il-gwan remains DPR Korea's key attacking outlet for their AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 campaign. As well as the attacking impetus he provides, Jong brings a high degree of work rate from the front to complement his composed finishing in front of goal.



More recently, the East Asians won back-to-back AFC Challenge Cups in 2010 and 2012, while they have qualified for the past two AFC Asian Cups, only to fall at the group stage. They return for the third successive time having suffered just one defeat in the third round of qualifying.



GROUP F JAPAN

Asian Cup Record

41 Matches
24 Won
12 Drawn
5 Lost

History:

Champions 2011, 2004,
2000, 1992; Fourth Place
2007; Quarter-Finals 2015,
1996; Group Stage 1988



Four-time champions Japan secured their ninth consecutive appearance at the finals of the AFC Asian Cup and the Samurai Blue will be looking to re-establish their dominance of the continental game after a disappointing campaign at the 2015 edition.

Possessing the finest AFC Asian Cup record in recent history, Japan have won four of the last seven tournaments with their maiden title coming at the 1992 competition.

A defeat in the quarter-finals four years later was then followed by back-to-back titles in 2000 and 2004, with a fourth place finish at the co-hosted event in Southeast Asia in 2007 coming before their return to the throne as kings of the continent at the 2011 tournament in Qatar.

Japan entered Australia 2015 as defending champions and favourites, so their last eight defeat to the United Arab Emirates was a result that stunned many. Nevertheless, Japan retain their status as one of the powerhouses of Asian football, having also represented the continent at the FIFA World Cup finals on six occasions, including reaching the Round of 16 at the 2002, 2010

KEY PLAYER:

Maya Yoshida

Part of the last Japan side to win the AFC Asian Cup, in 2011, Maya Yoshida has gone on to establish himself as instrumental in the Samurai Blue backline. The defender helped the East Asians flourish in their sixth successive FIFA World Cup, and his organisational skills and positional awareness will be key in the UAE.



and 2018 editions.

The Samurai Blue's impressive performances at the FIFA World Cup Russia 2018, and morale-boosting victories in the subsequent friendly matches, show that things are looking up for the four-time Asian champions ahead of the continental showpiece.



GROUP F UZBEKISTAN

Asian Cup Record

24 Matches
11 Won
3 Drawn
10 Lost

History:

Fourth Place 2011;
Quarter-Finals 2015, 2007,
2004; Group Stage 2000,
1996



The White Wolves of Uzbekistan have been one of Asia's most consistent performers over the last decade, with three quarter-final appearances and a fourth-place finish at the last four editions of the AFC Asian Cup.

However, they have never quite been able to take their game to that next level to compete for silverware. Their best performance in the AFC Asian Cup came in 2011, when they made the semi-finals, only to be comprehensively beaten 6-0 by eventual runners-up Australia.

They once again only narrowly missed qualification for the FIFA World Cup in 2018, drawing 0-0 with Korea Republic in their final match in Tashkent to not only miss out on automatic qualification, but also a play-off spot on goal difference to Syria, which prompted coach Samvel Babayan to step down from his role.

Nevertheless, a new wave of talent looks set to take Uzbekistan forward as they target an improvement on their quarter-final appearance at the 2015 AFC Asian Cup.

Eldor Shomurodov, Dostonbek

KEY PLAYER:

Odil Ahmedov

Uzbekistan captain Odil Ahmedov will be appearing at his third AFC Asian Cup after announcing his arrival in style in 2011 with a stunning 40-yard goal against Qatar.

A calming presence in the centre of the park, the Shanghai SIPG man will be key to the Central Asians' chances of reaching a first final.



Khamdamov and Odiljon Xamrobekov are exciting young starlets, while Shanghai SIPG star midfielder Odil Ahmedov, who continues to deliver for club and country with minimum fuss and fanfare, will be the man charged with inspiring his nation to new heights.



GROUP F OMAN

Asian Cup Record

9 Matches
2 Won
3 Drawn
4 Lost

History:

Group Stage 2015, 2007,
2004



oman won their first international trophy since winning the Gulf Cup in 2009 after they defeated the United Arab Emirates on penalties at the beginning of 2018 to claim the title for the second

time.

And the West Asians will now be looking to bring a strong 2018 into this year's AFC Asian Cup with hopes of making it to the knockout stages for the very first time.

On their tournament debut in 2004, Oman were narrowly beaten 1-0 by defending champions Japan in their opening game, before claiming a memorable 2-2 draw with the Islamic Republic of Iran as Amad Al Hosni became the first Omani to score in the continental competition.

A 2-0 victory over Thailand followed but Oman were desperately unlucky to lose out on a place in the quarter-finals as second-placed Iran finished just a point above them. Oman fell at the first hurdle in 2007, but they did manage a fine 1-1 draw with Australia and were just seconds away from claiming all three points.

The West Asians appeared at their third AFC Asian Cup in Australia in 2015, with the highlight being a 1-0 victory over Kuwait in their final group

KEY PLAYER:

Jameel Al Yahmadi

One of the Reds' brightest hopes is young midfielder Jameel Al Yahmadi. A left-footed right-winger, the Al Shabab man's main strength is his technique and ability to carve out chances for himself or his teammates by cutting inside from the flank. Pacey and skillful, Al Yahmadi is capable of creating havoc in opposition's defences, and his direct running offers Oman a key outlet on the counter-attack.



game.

Dutch coach Pim Verbeek, who successfully steered Oman to their fourth AFC Asian Cup, will have the experience of goalkeeper Ali Al Habsi and Ahmed Mubarak to call on, while attacking duo Abdulaziz Al Muqbali and Khalid Al Hajri were on deadly form throughout the qualifying campaign.



GROUP F TURKMENISTAN

Asian Cup Record

3 Matches
0 Won
1 Drawn
2 Lost

History:

Group Stage 2004



After declaring independence from the former Soviet Union in 1991, Turkmenistan made their first and, so far, only appearance at the AFC Asian Cup back in 2004. Qualifying undefeated, with four wins and two draws from their six matches, they were drawn alongside Uzbekistan, Iraq and three-time champions Saudi Arabia, who they would face in their opening Group C match.

Nazar Bayramov put Turkmenistan ahead in just the sixth minute, but a brace from Yasser Al Qahtani looked to have seen off the stubborn challenge of the Central Asians. However, drama ensued as a 93rd-minute equaliser from Begencmuhammet Kulyyev earned the country their first point at the AFC Asian Cup, but they would ultimately exit at the first hurdle.

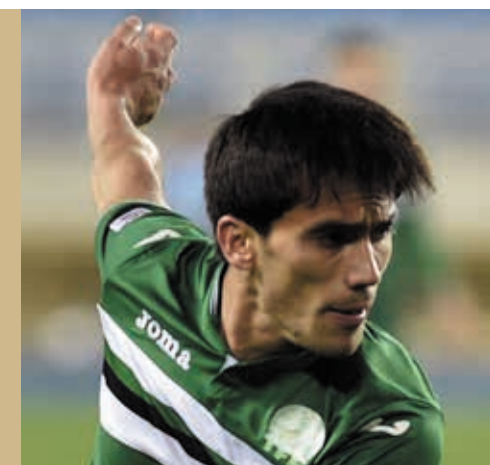
Turkmenistan came close to returning to the continental stage for the 2015 AFC Asian Cup in Australia when they finished runners-up to DPR Korea in the 2012 AFC Challenge Cup, thus narrowly missing out on the automatic qualification spot granted to the winners.

KEY PLAYER:

Arslanmyrat Amanov

Turkmenistan captain Arslanmyrat Amanov boasts experience both at home and abroad having played club football in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

Now back in his homeland with Altyn Asyr, the midfielder skipped the Central Asians as they advanced to their second AFC Asian Cup and first since 2004.



But, after starting their 2019 AFC Asian Cup qualifying campaign with a shock defeat in Guam, the Central Asians eventually advanced to the third round, where victory over Chinese Taipei in November 2017 secured their place at the continental tournament.



CHASING GLORY

A STRING OF EXCELLENT DISPLAYS IN THE 2018 FIFA WORLD CUP AND AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ENSURED ALIREZA BEIRANVAND ENJOYED A SUPERB YEAR. WITH THE AFC ASIAN CUP UAE 2019 NOW UPON US, THE CUSTODIAN IS DESPERATE TO END THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN'S LONG WAIT FOR THE TROPHY.

By: Peter Alsop • Photo: Lagardère Sports/Getty Images





Moscow's Luzhniki Stadium waited in anticipation as referee Mark Geiger ran to the sidelines to take a second look at Saeid Ezatollahi's challenge on Cristiano Ronaldo, before the Islamic Republic of Iran's worst fears were confirmed and a penalty was awarded in Portugal's favour following a VAR (video assistant referee) review.

At 1-0 down in their third and final Group B match, Iran, who had impressed to that point at the FIFA World Cup Russia 2018, were staring elimination firmly in the face. A second goal would surely end their campaign and send the Portuguese, and Spain, through.

Fifty-three minutes gone, Ronaldo paced forward, side-footed to the goalkeeper's left but was left head in hands a split second later. Alireza Beiranvand had guessed correctly, parried the ball out and then quickly smothered it.

In an instance, the Persepolis custodian, who was already enjoying an excellent tournament, was being talked about around the globe as his save from arguably the finest player on the planet had allowed his country to dream for just a little bit longer.

"Let me tell you a funny story," begins

Beiranvand.

"Before the World Cup, a [fake] video was published in which Cristiano Ronaldo was lining up against me, and I felt there was some harsh criticism, with people joking that he would score numerous goals past me.

"This was one of the things that came into my mind when he was getting ready to take the



penalty. I also thought of my tough background and how much it would mean to me to save one of his penalties.

"I had studied how he took them and had made my decision to dive left. After I saved the penalty, I felt the weight of pressure come off my shoulders and felt like I could have fallen asleep. I was able to embrace the sweetest moment of my life."

A dramatic second half ensued with Carlos Queiroz's team showing just what they were capable of as an attacking force. Eventually, following another VAR decision, Karim Ansarifard drew Team Melli level from the spot in added time.

The European champions faced a nerve-racking final few minutes and Mehdi Taremi had a golden opportunity to send the Iranians into the knockout rounds, but skewed his effort wide, as Iran were ultimately eliminated.

It had been a rollercoaster campaign, with the Iranians sealing a smash-and-grab win against Morocco in their first outing before another resolute defensive display in a narrow 1-0 loss to Spain. They were out, but they had more than held their own against some of the world's best and, along the way, gained many plaudits.

For Beiranvand, then 25, it marked the high point of a long journey that had seen him move to the Iranian capital at an early age as he set out to achieve his dreams.

"I have lived a hard life and have had some very difficult moments; nobody knew me when I left home and came to Tehran," explains Beiranvand.

"I used to have trials at different clubs to try and prove that I was good enough to offer a professional contract. But I also needed somewhere to sleep at nights, so because of

that I worked in restaurants and at carwashes, for example, to be able to afford it.

"Now I have the chance to play against the best footballers in the world, like at the World Cup in Russia, and live a nice life with my family and teammates. I think this is the result of the hard work I put in when I was younger.

"I'd say half of my dreams and wishes have already come true, but my background is always the motivation that drives me forward to progress more and more."

Beiranvand had narrowly missed out on the FIFA World Cup four years earlier after being named in Queiroz's initial 30-man preliminary squad, before he was among the 23 just over six months later at the 2015 AFC Asian Cup in Australia.

Despite not getting any game time, the then Naft Tehran custodian was getting closer to the Number 1 jersey and his chance finally arrived during the joint 2018 FIFA World Cup-AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 qualifying campaign in late 2015.

A 6-0 victory on your debut may sound like a dream start, although Beiranvand was dismissed in the final 20 minutes. Queiroz did not lose faith, though, and it was not long

Left & Above FIFA World Cup Russia 2018

Below Left & Right FIFA World Cup Russia 2018 Qualifiers

before the 'keeper became an integral part of the starting line-up.

Iran went on to qualify for the AFC Asian

"AFTER I SAVED THE PENALTY, I FELT THE WEIGHT OF PRESSURE COME OFF MY SHOULDERS ... I WAS ABLE TO EMBRACE THE SWEETEST MOMENT OF MY LIFE."

Cup with minimal fuss and advanced into the next stage of FIFA World Cup qualifying. It was here where they showcased a defensive masterclass when, with Beiranvand as the last line of defence, they conceded no goals in their first nine games to progress to the global showpiece for the fifth time.

"We did so well in those matches and did not let in a goal until our very last game against Syria and were the first Asian team to qualify for the World Cup," recalls Beiranvand.

"The draw made the World Cup even more special for us as we had the former world champions and current European champions in our group. It was the toughest group in the World Cup.

"You saw we were only a chance away from qualifying as the winner of our group. And [despite going out] we were so pleased when we saw Iranians were happy and satisfied with our performance."

The strong showing in Russia saw a number of Iran's home-based stars be snapped up by clubs in Europe and Qatar, while Beiranvand was heavily linked with a move away from Persepolis.

With the Tehran side in the





AFC Champions League quarter-finals and the AFC Asian Cup six months away, the goalkeeper opted to stay put.

And he was rewarded for his loyalty as Persepolis came from behind to oust Qatar's Al Duhail, who had previously won all nine of their games in the competition, in the quarter-finals.

Branko Ivankovic's side faced another Qatari team, Al Sadd, in the last four and claimed a 1-0 victory in the first leg in Doha. The return meeting at a packed Azadi Stadium proved to be a night to remember.

Al Sadd broke the deadlock early on through the tournament's top scorer Baghdad Bounedjah to mean another away goal would leave the hosts in all sorts of problems.

Siamac Nemati levelled shortly after the interval but the game remained on a knife edge and, as the match drew towards its close, Persepolis knew an Al Sadd goal would see them advance to the final.

With three minutes remaining, Jung Woo-young floated a ball into the box that was met by the unmarked Xavi Hernandez, whose goalbound header was tipped over by a world-class save from Beiranvand.

Azadi Stadium breathed a collective sigh of relief and soon after Persepolis' place in

their maiden AFC Champions League final was confirmed. For the second time in a matter of months, Beiranvand had denied one of the finest players of a generation and further enhanced his growing reputation.

"After the World Cup we lost four or five good players and our team was still serving a transfer ban," says Beiranvand.

"I had won the domestic championship for the past two years and I thought I owed it to Persepolis to stay – I didn't really want to leave

"I'D SAY HALF OF MY DREAMS AND WISHES HAVE ALREADY COME TRUE, BUT MY BACKGROUND IS ALWAYS THE MOTIVATION THAT DRIVES ME FORWARD TO PROGRESS MORE AND MORE."

them in a difficult situation.

"My concentration was only on Persepolis and I wanted to become an ACL champion with them."

Aiming to become the first Iranian side to lift the AFC Champions League, Persepolis' campaign ended in heartbreak as a 2-0 first-leg

defeat in Japan to Kashima Antlers left them a mountain to climb in Tehran.

As ever, Azadi Stadium was packed to the rafters for the return meeting, but this time there would be no happy ending as a scoreless draw ensued and Iran's wait for the continent's biggest club prize continued.

Less than two months after the AFC Champions League final, though, comes the AFC Asian Cup, a tournament Iran will enter as many people's favourites.

Eliminated by neighbours Iraq in the quarter-finals in 2015, Queiroz's side have enjoyed steady progress in the ensuing years and, on the back of their impressive FIFA World Cup showing, will be expected to challenge for the title.

The Central Asian country's recent record in the tournament does not read well, however, as they have been eliminated at the quarter-final stage in the past three editions and last reached the final in 1976 when they won the third of three successive titles.

For many it remains a mystery as to why a continental giant is now in its fifth decade since last being crowned champions, particularly when they have boasted some of Asia's finest talents – Ali Daei, Mehdi Mahdavia and Ali Karimi to name a few. Beiranvand is fully aware

All 2018 AFC Champions League

of the significance of the drought.

"After playing in the World Cup, now the burden of the Asian Cup falls on our shoulders, so we are looking ahead to that and preparing well for it," he notes.

"We are competing with strong teams such as Korea Republic, Japan, Australia, Uzbekistan, Saudi Arabia and China, but we are going to the Asian Cup to bring the title back to Iran. We are confident we can do it after 42 years."

If Beiranvand's list of potential title contenders is anything to go by, the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 will be as open as the tournament has ever been, with six former winners in contention.

The new-look competition will also feature three debutants and a record number of participating teams as 23 nations will join hosts UAE early next year.

Iran have been drawn in Group D alongside Iraq, who they will look to gain revenge on for the 2015 defeat, an ever-improving Vietnam and newcomers Yemen.

As with many sides in the Emirates, Team Melli will hope to benefit from a sizable

expatriate community based in the country, with up to half a million Iranians said to be living in the UAE.

"Of course, our fans there can help us; there was also big support for us in Russia as in every match we had the advantage of 30-40,000 fans in the stadium," he recalls.

"There is a big community of Iranians in the UAE and it's also very close to Iran. Most of our team have experienced either playing for Emirati clubs or against them in the ACL, so we're also very familiar with the stadiums."

Ultimately, though, success or failure will come down to a squad that is full of talent and

"WE ARE GOING TO THE ASIAN CUP TO BRING THE TITLE BACK TO IRAN. WE ARE CONFIDENT WE CAN DO IT AFTER 42 YEARS."

is enjoying the benefit of Queiroz's near eight-year tenure.

The defensive record in FIFA World Cup qualifying, and subsequent compact displays at the tournament, sees Team Melli rightly commended for their defending, but there remains no shortage of attacking quality at the

other end.

With Iran going into the continental competition among the favourites, rather than as underdogs as in Russia, the forwards will be looking to show exactly what they can do.

"We have great strikers in our team such as Mehdi Taremi and Karim Ansarifard, while I also think Sardar Azmoun can be among the top three forwards in the tournament," says Beiranvand.

"He is very good at reading what defenders are going to do and is quick to react on the pitch"

While Beiranvand's immediate thoughts are on the AFC Asian Cup, the months ahead may also see speculation around his club future start to surface again.

And he is honest enough to admit that, while his heart is with Persepolis, there may be a time in his career when, if the right opportunity arises, he will think about moving overseas.

"For now, I am concentrating on the Asian Cup, and I would really like to be the best goalkeeper at the tournament," he adds.

"After that, I will have the time to think about any offers, but like I have always said, if I leave Iran one day, I would want it to be for a big club in Europe."

HERE TO COMPETE

AFTER IRAQ FAMOUSLY WON THE AFC ASIAN CUP IN 2007, YOUNG MIDFIELDER BASHAR RESAN IS PART OF THE NEW GENERATION OF IRAQI FOOTBALLERS LOOKING TO REPLICATE THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF THOSE FROM OVER A DECADE AGO.

By: Wael Jabir Photos: Lagardère Sports/Getty Images

The Iraqi crowd at Canberra Stadium erupted at the sight of Vahid Amiri's spot-kick cannoning off the upright after the previous 12 penalties had been scored by both Iraq and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Amiri had come on as a substitute, and his miss from 12 yards paved the way for defender Salam Shaker to send Iraq into the 2015 AFC Asian Cup semi-finals at the expense of their neighbours.

Over 8,000 miles away from Canberra, 19-year-old Bashar Resan and his club teammates echoed the joys of their countrymen in Australia, celebrating a famous victory over their arch rivals.

"I was at Air Force Club at the time," says Resan. "We were in a training camp in Erbil, in the north of Iraq. We

had a training session scheduled, but the Iraq v Iran match ran into extra-time then penalties. So, the training had to be delayed by an hour.

"After the game, there were wild celebrations in the dressing room, it was as if we had won a trophy. It was an unforgettable match for all Iraqis.

"It is always a special occasion when Iraq and Iran clash, be it in World Cup qualifiers, the AFC Asian Cup, or any competition. The 2015 AFC Asian Cup showed how big this game is."

Fast forward two years from that classic encounter to October 17, 2017. Both Resan and Amiri sat on the grass, head between hands as a 2-2 draw in the second leg of the AFC Champions League semi-finals saw Persepolis exit at the hands of Al Hilal after reaching the last four for the first time.

Resan had made the move from Air Force Club to Iran's most successful





side, Persepolis, in July 2017, playing a bit-part role as an impact substitute as the Tehran-based club reached the semi-finals of Asia's top club competition.

Moving east across the border was just one of the highlights of an eventful three-year period for the Iraqi international. In 2016, he helped Iraq's U-23s win bronze at the AFC U23 Championship in Qatar and qualify for the 2016 Olympic Games.

The midfielder missed out on playing at the Olympics, but his year went from good to better as he scored in the Iraqi FA Cup final to help Air Force Club defeat Baghdad rivals Al Zawraa Club 2-0 and lift the trophy. A few months later, Resan and his teammates added more silverware to their cabinets. Air Force Club became the first Iraqi team to win the AFC Cup, in 2016, defeating JSW Bengaluru of India in the final.

The side would go on to retain their title in 2017 and 2018, but halfway through the 2017 campaign, Resan had swapped Baghdad for Tehran, where he would become teammates with Amiri, the man he so joyously watched miss that spot-kick in 2015.

A memorable FIFA World Cup performance in mid-2018 meant Amiri was

soon snapped by Turkish side Trabzonspor. Persepolis had lost a key man, but Resan stepped up to become a central piece in the jigsaw for coach Branko Ivankovic.

Tehran's Red Army repeated their continental heroics, going one step further by defeating Qatar's Al Sadd to reach the AFC Champions League final for the first time in their history, before losing 2-0 to Japan's Kashima Antlers over two legs.

At the beginning of 2019, Resan and Amiri's paths will cross again as they go from teammates to opponents when the Lions of Mesopotamia face Team Melli in Group D at Dubai's Al Maktoum Stadium.

"The game in 2015 was a fiercely contested affair, and this time around it will be hotly anticipated too," notes Resan. "Not just for supporters of the two teams, but for Asian football fans in general."

"For me, it will be an extra special game. Most of the Iran players are my friends, current or former Persepolis teammates or opponents in the league."

Iran might be well above Iraq in the FIFA rankings, but that will not stop the 2007 Asian champions from taking on their rivals with the same intensity that earned them victory in Australia four years ago.

"We never play just to make up the

numbers," says Resan. "Iraq always want to compete for top honours, so we are ready for Iran and for the AFC Asian Cup as a whole."

It is now more than a decade on from Iraq's historic AFC Asian Cup title-winning campaign in 2007 and the "Golden Generation" have all either retired or are winding down their careers, but the memory still burns brightly for Resan. Indeed, it is his first memory of watching the national team.

"I remember the tournament and that team very well," he says. "I liked Nashat Akram a lot. The midfielder had very good vision, passes and skill."

"Also Karrar Jassim, his style is similar to my style. His movement, passing and skill is how I modelled my game. These two were among my favourites."

"For the final itself, I was at home with my family watching the game. I remember the moment Younis Mahmoud headed home the winning goal on 73 minutes. I celebrated with my neighbours and my friends all day until well past midnight."

"That moment when I saw the players lifting the trophy and becoming champions. It moved me so much, I became very emotional at those scenes. It pushed me

so much to strive to become an Iraq national team player."

While Resan never got the opportunity to take to the field for Iraq with his 2007 heroes Akram and Jassim, he did line up with Mahmoud in his debut for the senior national side against Peru in a friendly in September 2014.

"It was a fantastic moment to play with Younis Mahmoud. Having watched him on TV and then to play alongside him was surreal," recalls Resan.

"Younis told me he liked me as a footballer because I was a skillful player. His motivation pushed me to try my best and he gave me lots of good advice on how to improve my game on the football field."

Resan has gone on to cement his place as part of the new generation, with the 2007 success not far from their minds as the benchmark to be compared against.

Former United Arab Emirates head coach Srecko Katanec has been brought in to take the rebuilding process into the next phase. The Slovenian has assembled a squad of young players, the vast majority of whom ply their trade abroad, either in the Gulf or at European clubs.

"We have a very good coach in Katanec," says the midfielder. "Through the friendly

Top Left 2016 AFC Cup
Above Left 2018 AFC Champions League
Bottom Left 2018 AFC U23 Championship
Left 2018 FIFA World Cup Qualifiers
Above Friendly versus Qatar

matches, he and the coaching staff got to understand the players and the Iraqi football culture, so now it is up to us, the players, to show what Iraqi football is all about."

Iraq's preparations for the AFC Asian Cup saw them face fellow participants such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Palestine, but their biggest test came against Argentina back in October, when they were beaten 4-0 by the Albiceleste.

For Resan, it was a match he could never forget. The midfielder was by far his side's best performer against superior opposition, but while he strutted his stuff on the turf at Prince Faisal bin Fahd Stadium in Riyadh, the then 21-year-old was not aware tragedy had struck the family.

Hours ahead of the game, news had emerged that Resan's mother had passed away. But in an effort to keep the players focused, a ban on using phones was in place, meaning Iraq's number 13 went into

the game unaware of the situation.

The message did come through at half-time, and a tearful Resan was withdrawn early in the second half. He flew straight back home, missing the subsequent 1-1 draw with Saudi Arabia a few days later.

Resan demonstrated tremendous mental strength as he took to the field less than two weeks later, helping Persepolis secure a place in the AFC Champions League final following the 2-1 aggregate victory over Al Sadd. There were mixed emotions for him at the final whistle as he broke down in tears, dedicating the win to his late mother.

One of Iraq's top talents, Resan is hopeful of a bright 2019 for the nation's football team, and if they are to be successful, a winning mentality and ambition are the two key words according to the midfielder.

"If we go into the tournament with the mindset we are just there to play, then we won't achieve anything," he insists. "We have to go there to challenge for the title, regardless of any differences."

"Our target is to reach the semi-finals, then the final. This will be on all the players' minds. Our ambition should always be to go far in the tournament, to show that Iraqi football is doing great."

EYES ON THE PRIZE

HAVING MADE A SUCCESSFUL DEBUT IN THE UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE THIS SEASON, AUSTRALIA DEFENDER MILOS DEGENEK IS FOCUSED ON THE NEXT TWO TARGETS IN HIS CAREER: TO APPEAR AT AND WIN THE AFC ASIAN CUP WITH THE SOCCEROOS.

By: Daniel Pordes • Photo: Getty Images

It's fair to say that the time is truly now for Milos Degenek. Since joining Red Star Belgrade in the summer, the young Serbia-born Australian has enjoyed a whirlwind few months that looks set to reach its pinnacle at AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019.

Up until January 2017, Degenek's career had been a mixed affair with moderate success in Germany intermingled with injury-wrecked spells. But 18 months of consistent football at Yokohama F. Marinos in Japan then followed, and 2018 brought with it FIFA World Cup and UEFA Champions League experience.

While he did not see pitch time at Russia 2018, despite being in Bert van Marwijk's squad, Degenek has been an ever-present for Red Star since his move from Yokohama and successfully helped the Serbian club qualify for Europe's highest level of club competition for the first time since the 1991-1992 European Cup.

Red Star, the 1992 European champions, were landed in a tough group with Liverpool, Napoli and Paris Saint-Germain but Degenek seized the opportunity with both hands.

"The UEFA Champions League is a dream come true. Club-wise it is among the pinnacle of a player's career and it is something I have always dreamed about," says Degenek, who lined-up in the Red Star side that famously defeated English Premier League giants Liverpool 2-0 in the Serbian capital on November 6.

"We played well against Liverpool and managed to shut them out. [Milan] Pavkov scored two beautiful goals, but all the boys played well. I think Liverpool underestimated us and consequently paid for that mistake.

"It's not easy for teams to come to Belgrade and play. The atmosphere here is unreal. You don't get anything like it anywhere else in the world."

For the man who grew up idolising countryman Nemanja Vidic and his

Manchester United centre-back partner Rio Ferdinand, having a chance to test himself against a similar high calibre of opponent has been key in his evolution as a footballer.

Having started out as a midfielder – he counts Zinedine Zidane as one of his boyhood heroes – Degenek is now firmly settled in his centre-back position, and looks now to more defensively-inclined stars such as Real Madrid captain Sergio Ramos as role models.

"Playing against top opposition can only help you as a player," Degenek notes.

"In our group, we had two of the top three teams in Europe which is good because you see where they're at and how they play, which can then be implemented into your own training.

"I've been trying to pay attention to things like that and most of all it's just a good challenge to take on the world's best players."

And now, having faced heavyweights from Italy, France and England, his eyes are firmly fixed on a new challenge: taking on the best of Asia and helping reigning AFC Asian Cup champions Australia successfully defend their continental title.

"The last AFC Asian Cup was in Australia on home soil and, even though I wasn't part of the set-up then, it was an unforgettable experience; written down in history and always to be remembered in Australian football," says Degenek, whose family moved from war-torn Belgrade to Australia just in time for the Sydney Olympics in 2000.

"I've never participated in it before, hopefully this will be my first time. The aim would be to win it, of course. To see us go all the way in my first tournament would be unbelievable, I know everyone in the team would love to get back-to-back titles."

As holders, Degenek believes that Graham Arnold's side should not only go

into the tournament hoping to win a second Asian championship but, indeed, believing that they will.

"I expect Australia to go into the Asian Cup full of confidence," says the man who grew up playing football at the renowned Westfields Sports High School, located in a western suburb of Sydney.

"I expect us to go into the tournament to dominate and win games, and to have a good tournament.

"I think fans should be excited about Australia being there because we're going to play bright, attacking football and we're going to be direct, offensive-minded, and be the team to beat.

"We aim to be the most entertaining team there."

With the high-profile retirements of the likes of Mile Jedinak and Tim Cahill a lot has changed since Australia's memorable 2015 AFC Asian Cup campaign, including the man in the dugout.

Ange Postecoglou, the 2015 AFC Coach of the Year, was replaced briefly at the Socceroos helm by Dutchman van Marwijk for the 2018 FIFA World Cup campaign, but Graham Arnold is the current long-term incumbent.

And it's an appointment that Degenek believes can help the continued progression of both his and Australia's football development.

"I am 100 percent there for the Socceroos and always will be. I believe in what Graham Arnold is doing," he says.

"We're not taking any backward steps and we expect to have a very good four-year cycle towards the next World Cup, a very successful one.

"We expect to dominate countries here in Asia and the world.

"It's a dream of mine to win a trophy with my country and I think we have a good chance – I'd love to go out there and win this tournament."



UP FOR THE CHALLENGE

HAVING SCORED HIS 50TH INTERNATIONAL GOAL TO SEAL THE PHILIPPINES' DEBUT APPEARANCE AT AN AFC ASIAN CUP TOURNAMENT, AZKALS CAPTAIN PHIL YOUNGHUSBAND IS READY TO STEP UP ONTO THE BIG STAGE AT UAE 2019, WITH AMBITIONS OF MAKING MORE CONTINENTAL HISTORY FOR FILIPINO FOOTBALL.

By: Daniel Pordes • Photo: Getty Images

When Phil Younghusband stepped up to the penalty spot at Manila's Rizal Memorial Stadium, he knew his nation was on the brink of history and – finally – ending the nightmare of four years ago.

For on May 30, 2014, the Philippines had stepped out in the Maldivian capital of Male in the final of the now defunct AFC Challenge Cup with a maiden place in the AFC Asian Cup on the line for the winners.

But, despite their efforts, it was to be Ashraf Numan's goal just before the hour mark that meant it was Palestine, not the Azkals, who would win the qualifying tournament and thereby make their continental debut at AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015.

It was a devastating setback for Younghusband and his teammates.

At the Rizal, this time, there would be no denying the Philippines. Their skipper emphatically slammed home the stoppage-time spot-kick to ensure a 2-1 win over Tajikistan and a place at AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019, sending the partisan TV commentators into shrill screams of joy and the home crowd into roars of ecstasy.

"It meant a lot to me personally, to everyone involved in Filipino football," reflects Younghusband on his special night at the end of March last year.

"We had the disappointment at the 2014 AFC Challenge Cup of not qualifying for the 2015 AFC Asian Cup in Australia, and I think because of that disappointment, qualifying for UAE 2019 feels that much more sweeter and that more amazing.

"With regards the goal itself, I was just thankful for my teammates because they won the penalty and gave me the opportunity to score my 50th goal but the only thing running through my mind was: I don't care whoever

scores, as long as we qualify for the Asian Cup.

"The most important thing that day was qualifying, the feeling of satisfaction of that goal absolutely comes second to that feeling of qualifying.

"I've been through a lot, been with the national team for over 12 years now and so I've gone through a lot of highs and a lot of lows.

"But for all those lows the feeling we felt once we knew we qualified against Tajikistan meant they were worth it because it means so much and is a great opportunity to improve and to progress."

Younghusband sees the chance to play at their first AFC Asian Cup as not only a proud achievement for himself and his teammates but an important milestone in the development of football in the archipelago.

"When I first joined the national team, I didn't really understand the steps of progression, the ladder, and for me it was always about getting better and better," says Younghusband.

"With Filipinos, the sky is the limit for football and with the right support we can go far. But to actually pinpoint where we would be at this point, I couldn't have told you.

"Especially with the way Asian football has been growing too, with Asian teams doing well at the FIFA World Cup, and the improvements in the domestic leagues in Asia.

"When I started, Filipino football and Asian football as a whole was still developing, so for us to be in the biggest Asian Cup competition, in the biggest sport in the world, it truly is an amazing thought when you put it in perspective.

"We're looking forward to playing against the top-quality teams, the World Cup sides, like Korea Republic who are in our group.

"We know that improving and progressing as a football nation can only be done by getting that exposure and experience of

playing against the best teams in the world, the best teams in Asia, so we're very excited and looking forward to the challenge."

A big boost for the Philippines national team's debut AFC Asian Cup campaign will be the support of their overseas-based compatriots, with over 670,000 Filipinos alone living in the United Arab Emirates, of which some 450,000 live in Dubai.

"We're very aware of the large Filipino community in the UAE. In general, there's a huge number of our countrymen in the Middle East including many overseas workers," says Younghusband.

"I remember playing one particular match in Kuwait some years ago, we had 75 percent of the supporters in a sold-out 42,000-seater stadium. That was an amazing feeling, it was like a home game.

"So hopefully we can garner all the support from this expatriate community in the Middle East and make all our games like home games. If we want to be successful, we'll need as much support as possible, and we know Filipinos are so welcoming and supportive of the team."

When it comes to his specific ambitions for the tournament itself, Younghusband is positive but realistic.

Drawn in a tough Group C alongside Korea Republic, China PR and Kyrgyz Republic, the Philippines are sure to face a tough challenge in the UAE.

"We said to ourselves as soon as we qualified, that we didn't just want to take part, we wanted to compete," adds Younghusband.

"For me personally, I just want to play – I hope the coach will pick me! – and secondly I hope for the team that we can qualify for the knockout stage.

"I don't think it's unrealistic that we could be among the top four third best placed teams in the group stage.

"If we play well, everything goes right, and we have a little bit of luck then it is possible. That's a realistic goal for me."



FIELD OF DREAMS

THAILAND RETURN TO THE AFC ASIAN CUP FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE 2007, AND MIDFIELDER THITIPAN PUANGCHAN IS READY TO SEIZE THE OPPORTUNITY TO SHINE ON ASIA'S BIGGEST STAGE WHEN THEIR UAE 2019 CAMPAIGN KICKS OFF ON JANUARY 6.

By: Paul Murphy • Photo: Lagardère Sports

Thailand midfielder Thitipan Puangchan is dreaming of a 2019 AFC Asian Cup final against Japan as the War Elephants prepare for their first participation at the tournament since co-hosting it in 2007.

While an appearance in the final would be beyond the expectations of even the most optimistic of Thai fans, Thitipan would love to go up against the Asian team that he admires most.

"I would like to play against any of the big teams in the final but if I have to choose one, it would be Japan," said Thitipan. "They are a very good team and I enjoy watching them on TV so I would really like the experience of playing against them."

In reality, a place in the last 16 would be considered a satisfactory performance from a Thailand side that was unlucky to miss out on progressing from the group stage 12 years ago.

A 1-1 draw with eventual champions Iraq was followed by a 2-0 victory over Oman, leaving the War Elephants needing just a point against Australia in the final match.

Unfortunately, three goals in the final 10 minutes killed off the home side as the Socceroos won 4-0 to go through on the head-to-head record.

This year, the Thais do not have home advantage but they have what appears a more favourable draw, going up against hosts United Arab Emirates, India and Bahrain.

Twelve years has been a long wait, with most of a generation of Thai players missing out. This makes Thitipan determined to make the most of this opportunity.

"Of course, it's hugely important for Thailand," he acknowledged. "This is Asia's biggest football competition. I am really looking forward to playing in it and want to take Thailand as far as possible in the tournament."

"All of our opponents will be strong as you have to be at a certain level to play on this stage but our head coach will prepare us well."

While the dream final against Japan is likely to remain just a dream, Thitipan feels the War Elephants have enough quality to spring a surprise and go as far as the last four.

"It's going to be really tough but we have a good team spirit and teamwork," he said. "We have also had time to prepare. It will not be easy but we hope we can go as far as the quarter- or semi-finals."

One player who won't be standing in their way is 2016 AFC Player of the Year Omar Abdulrahman. The UAE playmaker has been ruled out of the tournament with a knee injury and Thitipan admits it is something of a relief not to be up against the man who tormented the Thais in a 2018 FIFA World Cup qualifier in Abu Dhabi two years ago.

"You have to admit that it's lucky for Thailand that we don't have to play against a player of his quality," said Thitipan. "I have played against him before and his performance was excellent so I know exactly how dangerous he can be. He caused us a lot of problems."

Another thing in Thailand's favour is the climate as the UAE winter should see cooler temperatures than tropical Bangkok but not to the extent that significant acclimatisation is a necessary part of the preparations.

"It's definitely an advantage that the weather in the UAE is quite similar to Thailand," said Thitipan. "We don't have to take time to adapt to the climate and we don't have to make any significant changes to our playing style."

While there may be similarities in the weather, Thai football is in a very different place compared to where it was in 2007.

Back then, despite the respectable

performance in the AFC Asian Cup, the national side were generally struggling. The Thai Premier League's rebranding and restructuring to include provincial teams was in its infancy and the dominant team in Thai football, Buriram United, did not even exist.

As Thailand approach this year's AFC Asian Cup, they can look back on five years of steady progress, which began with their triumph at the AFF (ASEAN Football Federation) Championship in 2014 – their first Southeast Asian title in 12 years.

They also reached the final stage of qualification for the 2018 FIFA World Cup, finishing ahead of Iraq in the first qualifying stage.

The backbone of this side features four players who were plying their trade abroad in 2018. Playmaker Chanathip Songkrasin, striker Teerasil Dangda, and wing-back Theerathon Bumnathan all play in the J.League, while goalkeeper Kawin Thamsatchanan is with Belgium's OH Leuven.

When the AFC Asian Cup comes around again in four years' time, Teerasil – who made a brief substitute appearance at the age of 19 in 2007 – will be 34, while Theerathon and Kawin will be 33. Chanathip will be younger at 29 but it seems the time has to be now for this group of players to make a significant impact for their country on a big stage.

But Thitipan was not going to get sentimental when asked about how this could be the final opportunity for the likes of Teerasil and Theerathon.

"It's a chance for everyone and it could be everyone's last chance," said Thitipan. "Every time you play for your country, you give 100 percent."

"It's always important, so it doesn't really matter if it's the last chance or not. Every player has to do their best regardless."

Thitipan and his teammates will certainly have to hit the ground running when they face India in what could be a pivotal opening match on January 6 in Abu Dhabi.



FLYING HIGH

ANTON ZEMLIANUKHIN HAS BEEN AT THE FOREFRONT OF KYRGYZ REPUBLIC’S RECENT RISE THAT HAS SEEN THE WHITE FALCONS QUALIFY FOR THEIR FIRST AFC ASIAN CUP. WITH THE COMPETITION NOW UPON US, THE FORWARD IS ALREADY EYEING THE KNOCKOUT ROUNDS.

By: Peter Alsop • Photo: Football Federation of the Kyrgyz Republic

Just over 1,000 spectators were in attendance on a chilly night at Incheon Football Stadium in Korea Republic on March 22, 2018, when another Republic – Kyrgyz – recorded the most important result in their 28-year history as a competitive football team.

The crunch clash against Myanmar in the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 qualifying campaign was played on neutral ground and, after the two sides had drawn 2-2 earlier in the campaign, victory would ensure the Kyrgyz a place in the competition while defeat would leave their destiny out of their hands.

Like so often had been the case in recent years, Anton Zemlianukhin would play a key role, with the forward netting the second and third goals in a resounding 5-1 victory that saw his nation qualify for their maiden AFC Asian Cup.

With all pressure off, Zemlianukhin scored another in Bishkek’s Dolen Omurzakov Stadium to round off their campaign with a 2-1 win over India as the Central Asians ended level on points with the Indians amid joyous scenes in the Kyrgyz capital.

“The whole country was closely following our qualifying group and the game against Myanmar was decisive,” said 30-year-old Zemlianukhin, who has played his club football in Kazakhstan, Turkey, Serbia and Thailand, as well as his homeland, in a nomadic career.

“After the final whistle we rushed to our few supporters who made the trip to Korea Republic to share the joy of the victory. There were emotions which I can’t really describe – we were all just over the moon,” admitted the country’s all-time leading goalscorer.

“Only after returning home to Kyrgyz Republic did it sink in that we’d achieved such a historic result by qualifying for the Asian Cup.”

Back when Kyrgyz Republic played their first ever international match, on August 23, 1992, Zemlianukhin was just three years old.

The 3-0 defeat to neighbours Uzbekistan in Tashkent was a sign of things to come as,

in their first 15 competitive matches under then coach Meklis Koshaliyev, they won just once and lost 11.

In the ensuing 10 years, development was slow, with their high point arriving in 2006 when they reached the semi-finals of the AFC Challenge Cup in Bangladesh.

A year later, Zemlianukhin made his debut and scored his first goal in a 1-1 draw with Lebanon in the 2009 Nehru Cup, but between 2011 and 2014 the forward was not part of the national team set-up and the Central Asians’ progress stalled.

Then, in 2015, things started to click for both Zemlianukhin and his country. Recalled to the national team by Russian coach Aleksandr Krestinin, the Kant native scored four goals as the Kryzgy won four and drew two of their eight games in the joint FIFA World Cup Russia 2018-AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 qualifiers, including an impressive 1-0 victory over Jordan in which he netted the only goal.

The White Falcons finished five points behind reigning AFC Asian Cup holders Australia in their group, just two adrift of Jordan and, perhaps most tellingly in terms of their progression, nine ahead of fellow Central Asians Tajikistan to advance directly to the third round of qualifiers for the continental tournament.

Zemlianukhin then scored six goals in the last four games of next phase as the Kyrgyz booked their ticket to the United Arab Emirates, where they will be part of a newly expanded 24-team tournament. His tally of 12 for the Central Asians means he is currently the nation’s all-time top scorer.

“Football is a team game and the goals I scored were a result of teamwork. Every player in the team was under huge pressure from the fans to deliver to the country,” noted the forward.

“It’s a nice feeling to be the main goalscorer, but it’s not my biggest achievement. More importantly is I play well and the team get good results.

“Our team is now going to take part in this prestigious tournament for the first time in our history. We are going to play against

world class teams, which is very cool and will be a priceless experience for us.”

For the first time in the tournament’s history, there will be four representatives from Central Asia, with the Islamic Republic of Iran, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan joining the Kyrgyz.

“Football is booming throughout the continent and Central Asia is no exception as we are developing at both national team and club level,” explained Zemlianukhin.

“Iran were at the World Cup in Russia, Uzbekistan reached the quarter-finals of the 2015 Asian Cup and, in the face of strong competition, we have given everything to become competitive too.”

Back in May, the draw for the eagerly awaited tournament paired Kyrgyz Republic in an intriguing group alongside Korea Republic, China and fellow debutants the Philippines.

“Korea have won the Asian Cup, while China and the Philippines have world-renowned coaches in Marcello Lippi and Sven-Goran Eriksson,” noted the forward.

“Playing against these teams will be an invaluable experience. It will be the first time in my life to be part of such a prestigious tournament and the whole team want to show our rivals what we can do when we play them.”

While Kyrgyz Republic will enter the tournament as one of the underdogs, the new format will give them hope that reaching the knockout rounds is a realistic target.

With 24 nations now competing, for the first time ever a Round of 16 has been introduced to mean four of the six third-placed teams will advance from the group stage.

“I think our chances of going to the Round of 16 are quite real ... we are targeting second place in our group,” admitted Zemlianukhin.

“Third place will put us in the position where we’re depending on results in other groups to qualify and we won’t be in full control of the situation.”

It may have taken more than 20 years for the White Falcons to be able to challenge on a continental level, but if the last three years are anything to go by then they will give a good account of themselves in the UAE.





Kashima Antlers Crowned Asian Kings



Kashima Antlers ensured Japan celebrated back-to-back Asian club championships after the J.League club edged out the Islamic Republic of Iran's Persepolis 2-0 on aggregate

in the two-legged final of the AFC Champions League.

Goals from Brazilian pair Leo Silva and Serginho in November 3's first leg at Kashima Soccer Stadium gave Go Oiwa's Kashima a crucial lead to take to the return meeting in Tehran a week later.

And it proved enough as 2017 semi-finalists Persepolis failed to find a breakthrough in front of 100,000 supporters at Azadi Stadium, with Kashima holding on to lift their maiden AFC Champions League title and replicating the feats of last year's winners Urawa Red Diamonds.

"I am so proud that we have won the AFC Champions League title for the first time," said Kashima coach Oiwa following the second leg.

"We played Real Madrid in the final of the FIFA Club World Cup two years ago but for me, tonight is more satisfying as we won the title.

"The name of Kashima Antlers will now echo throughout Asia."

Kashima were particularly impressive at home in the knockout stage of the tournament, disposing of China's Shanghai SIPG and Tianjin Quanjian as well as two-time Asian Club Championship winners Suwon Samsung Bluewings from Korea Republic on route to the final, and so expectations were high ahead of the first leg in Japan.

And the home crowd were not disappointed as midfielder Leo Silva found the target just before the hour mark. The Brazilian played a neat one-two with Shoma Doi on the edge of the Persepolis penalty area and cut inside before curling a low left-footed shot into the corner from 18 yards.

The goal broke the stalemate of an even contest between the two sides and things got even better for the hosts when Serginho doubled Kashima's advantage. The ball broke to Kento Misao 20 yards out and he played a deft pass into the path of Serginho on the right and the Brazilian placed his shot into the far corner from the edge of the six-yard box.

"We were too defensive in the first half and this allowed Persepolis to come at us. We changed that in the second half," said Oiwa following the first leg.

"We pushed forward more, used our flanks more freely which stretched their defence. This allowed us to go through the middle and create chances and score.

"This was just the first half and we need to focus on the second leg and our J.League challenge as well. It was good to have won but we must concentrate on getting ready for

the second leg."

And in the return fixture in front of a record crowd for an AFC Champions League final at Azadi Stadium, it was another closely fought battle between the sides. Kashima were indebted to the stalwart work of their backline and veteran goalkeeper Kwoun Sun-tae, who had previously won two continental titles with former club Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors.

Tournament MVP Yuma Suzuki worked tirelessly upfront for the visitors, while midfielder Misao also put in an impressive shift as the Persepolis attack was stifled and often forced to go to the long-ball option in their attempt to find a breakthrough.

And with the Iranian side ultimately unable to find a way past Kwoun and company, Kashima's first leg goals would prove the difference as Persepolis missed out on becoming Iran's first AFC Champions League winners.

"I am sorry we couldn't be Asian champions but this was our first major Asian final and we came very close," said Persepolis coach Branko Ivankovic following the second leg.

"The players and fans showed how beautiful and fair football is in Iran and I applaud them. I would also like to thank the staff and club for helping raise us to this level.

"I am so proud of my players, they tried so hard and put all their energy into the match. They are winners.

"We may have lost but this is an incentive to do better in the future. We now have the experience of having played at this level and we will improve."

Al Sadd's Baghdad Bounedjah, meanwhile, was the AFC Champions League top goalscorer after netting 13 goals for the semi-finalists from Qatar, ahead of Suwon's Dejan Damjanovic and Al Duhail's Youssef El Arabi.

SEMI-FINALS			
Kashima Antlers 	Suwon Samsung Bluewings 	Persepolis 	Al Sadd 
6-5		2-1	
Kashima Antlers win 6-5 on aggregate		Persepolis win 2-1 on aggregate	
03/10/18 Kashima Antlers 3 (Jang Ho-ik 21 OG, Serginho 84, Atsuto Uchida 90+3) Suwon Samsung Bluewings 2 (Atsuto Uchida 2 OG, Dejan Damjanovic 6) Kashima Soccer Stadium, Kashima	24/10/18 Suwon Samsung Bluewings 3 (Lim Sang-hyub 52, Jo Sung-jin 53, Dejan Damjanovic 60) Kashima Antlers 3 (Shuto Yamamoto 25, Daigo Nishi 64, Serginho 82) Suwon World Cup Stadium, Suwon	02/10/18 Al Sadd 0 Persepolis 1 (Ali Alipour 86) Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium, Doha	23/10/18 Persepolis 1 (Siamak Nemati 49) Al Sadd 1 (Baghdad Bounedjah 17) Azadi Stadium, Tehran
FINAL			
Kashima Antlers 	Persepolis 	2-0	
Kashima Antlers win 2-0 on aggregate			
03/11/18 Kashima Antlers 2 (Leo Silva 58, Serginho 70) Persepolis 0 Kashima Soccer Stadium, Kashima Attendance : 35,022	10/11/18 Persepolis 0 Kashima Antlers 0 Azadi Stadium, Tehran Attendance : 100,000		



Air Force Club Make History



Air Force Club were crowned 2018 AFC Cup champions, lifting the trophy for a record third successive year after a 2-0 win in late October's final against Turkmenistan's Altyn Asyr.

At Basra Sports City, nearly 25,000 fans saw the hosts' captain Hammadi Ahmed open the scoring in the 22nd minute before Ibrahim Bayesh headed home his side's second goal of the night just short of the hour mark to cement Air Force Club's place in history.

"We went into the game with great desire to win the title, our coach watched Altyn Asyr's previous matches and had a detailed plan for us," said Ahmed, who was named the tournament's MVP.

"The goal I scored is the most important of my career because I scored in the final as the team captain and this helped us win the AFC Cup for the third time.

"Winning the MVP is also something I will always cherish and will use it as motivation

to aim higher."

The Iraqi side had shown impressive resolve to reach the final unbeaten, eliminating Lebanon's Al Ahed and Jordan's Al Jazeera in the knockout rounds.

Altyn Asyr, meanwhile, had also gone without a loss on their march to the final as they aimed to become the first team from Central Asia to win the AFC Cup since Uzbekistan's Nasaf Qarshi in 2011.

Four wins from six in the group stage was followed with victories over JSW Bengaluru of India and DPR Korea's 4.25 SC in the knockout rounds as the side made history in becoming the first team from Turkmenistan in the competition climax.

Air Force Club, though, had won the tournament two years running and were aiming to become three-time continental champions.

The hosts came racing out of the blocks as Ahmed found space inside the box and rounded goalkeeper Mamed Orazmuhamedov, but the Altyn Asyr defence recovered, forcing the forward wide. Ahmed laid off the ball for Ali Husni whose effort was blocked in the fifth minute.

Ahmed had a golden chance to open the scoring in the 15th minute when he received Bayesh's cross from the right flank, but the Air Force Club captain's shot was collected by Orazmuhamedov.

Ahmed was more clinical just seven minutes later though as a dominant Air Force Club went into the interval at a goal up.

Altyn Asyr started the second half with renewed impetus, threatening through Altmyrat Annadurdyev whose effort from the edge of the box was tipped behind by

Mohammed Kassid five minutes after the restart.

Despite Altyn Asyr's best efforts, it was the home team who increased their lead in the 57th minute as Bayesh rose highest at the near post to power in a header for his side's second goal of the evening following Sameh Saeed's cross from the corner kick.

The visitors were given a golden chance to come back into the game in the 64th minute when Saad Natiq handled the ball inside the box, prompting the referee to award a penalty. Selim Nurmuradov stepped up to take the spot-kick but blasted his effort well over as Air Force Club's grip on the trophy tightened.

Annadurdyev came within a whisker of scoring his ninth goal of the 2018 AFC Cup in the 70th minute. The Altyn Asyr talisman did well to control a long pass from substitute Shorat Soyunov, but his left-footed strike on the half-volley struck the side netting.

Late pressure from Altyn Asyr produced little in terms of scoring chances, as Air Force Club remained resilient to secure a historic 2-0 win on home soil to lift their third AFC Cup title in a row.

"I congratulate Air Force Club for this achievement, the match was very difficult for us as they were highly motivated," said Altyn Asyr coach Yazguly Hojageldyyev.

"Although we lost, it was good experience for us. I am still very proud of my players and thank them for the great effort they have shown in the AFC Cup.

"Losing to Air Force Club is no shame as they are a big team but we will learn and come back stronger."



FINAL

27/10/18

Air Force Club v Altyn Asyr

2-0

(Hammadi Ahmed 22, Ibrahim Bayesh 57)





Saudi Arabia Win AFC U-19 Championship Title

Saudi Arabia were crowned AFC U-19 Championship Indonesia 2018 winners after early goals from Turki Al Ammar and Khalid Al Ghannam proved enough to defeat 12-time champions Korea Republic 2-1 in November's final in Bogor, Indonesia.

Al Ammar opened the scoring in the second minute at Pakansari Stadium before Al Ghannam doubled their advantage midway through the first half.

Korea Republic pulled one back through Cho Young-wook's penalty in the 64th minute but were unable to find an equaliser as Saudi Arabia added to the titles they won in 1986 and 1992.

The finalists, along with semi-finalists Qatar and Japan, all secured their passage to the 2019 FIFA U-20 World Cup in Poland.

Saudi Arabia began their campaign with a 2-1 victory over Malaysia in Group D, before advancing as table-toppers following wins over China and Tajikistan, with the latter joining the Saudis in the quarter-finals.

Korea Republic opened Group C with a 1-1 draw against Australia, then successive 3-1 victories over Jordan and Vietnam meant they progressed with few problems, while the Socceroos claimed the runners-up spot.

Hosts Indonesia raised expectations following a 3-1 opening-day victory over Chinese Taipei in Group A, while United Arab Emirates defeated Qatar 2-1.

The UAE eased past Chinese Taipei 8-1 in their second game and Qatar claimed a 6-5 victory over the Indonesians.

Qatar secured a 4-0 win over Chinese Taipei to book their place in the quarter-finals and they were joined by the hosts, who edged past the UAE 1-0.

In Group B, holders Japan began the defence of their title with a 5-2 victory over DPR Korea, before wins against Thailand and Iraq saw them return to the quarter-finals. Thailand, meanwhile, finished second.

The quarter-final between Qatar and Thailand finished 3-3 after 90 minutes, although the Qataris won 7-3 after extra-time with Abdulrasheed Umaru bagging a brace.

More than 60,000 fans turned out at

Gelora Bung Karno Stadium hoping Indonesia could upset Japan but, despite a brave effort, the hosts were defeated 2-0.

Jeon Se-jin scored the only goal of the game as Korea Republic ousted Tajikistan to return to the last four.

And Saudi Arabia proved too good for Australia as second-half goals from Firas Al Buraikan and Saud Abdulhamid helped claim a 3-1 win.

Jeon scored a first-half brace in the semi-final between Korea Republic and Qatar, before the East Asians progressed to their 17th final following a 3-1 win.

Japan were then ousted in the semi-finals as Al Ammar and Al Ghannam each scored in a 2-0 victory to ensure the Saudis' march continued.

It was the same pair that proved the heroes in the final with the 2-1 win ending Saudi Arabia's 26-year wait for the trophy.

Al Ammar was voted the tournament's MVP, while Qatar's Umaru picked up the Top Scorer accolade after netting seven goals.



Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Qatar	3	2	0	1	11	7	4	6
Indonesia	3	2	0	1	9	7	2	6
UAE	3	2	0	1	10	3	7	6
Chinese Taipei	3	0	0	3	2	15	-13	0

18/10/18
UAE 2 (Ahmad Fawzi 16, Ali Saleh 41) Qatar 1 (Abdulrasheed Umaru 36)
Indonesia 3 (Egy Maulana 50, Wiltan Sulaeman 70,89) Chinese Taipei 1 (Wang Chung Yu 53)
21/10/18
Chinese Taipei 1 (Wu Yen Shu 74) UAE 8 (Ahmad Fawzi 10, Ali Saleh 20, 67, Majed Rashed 35, 75, Rashed Mubarak51, 59, Abdullah Al Naqbi 70)
Qatar 6 (Hashim Ali 11, 51, Abdulrasheed Umaru 14, 41, 56, Mohammed Waad 24) Indonesia 5 (Luthfi Kamal 28, Rivaldo 65, 73, 81, Saddil Ramdani 69)
24/10/18
Indonesia 1 (Witan Sulaeman 23) UAE 0
Qatar 4 (Khaled Mansour 57, Hashim Ali 61, 77, Abdulrasheed Umaru 86 pen) Chinese Taipei 0

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Japan	3	3	0	0	13	3	10	9
Thailand	3	1	1	1	6	7	-1	4
DPR Korea	3	1	0	2	4	7	-3	3
Iraq	3	0	1	2	3	9	-6	1

19/10/18
Iraq 3 (Moamel Abdulridha 37, Wakaa Ramadhan 42, Hasan Abdulkareem 66) Thailand 3 (Kritsada Kaman 26, Korrawit Tasa 87, Suphanat Mueanta 90+4)
Japan 5 (Koki Saito 8, Hiroki Ito 19, Takefusa Kubo 65, Taisei Miyashiro 89, Hiroki Abe 90+3) DPR Korea 2 (Kye Tam 36, Kang Kuk-chol 41 pen)
22/10/18
DPR Korea 1 (Pak Kwang-chon 55) Iraq 0
Thailand 1 (Suphanat Mueanta 54) Japan 3 (Taisei Miyashiro 27, 44, Koki Saito 42)
25/10/18
Japan 5 (Yuta Taki 10, Kyosuke Tagawa 27, Taichi Hara 34, 77, Koki Saito 85) Iraq 0
Thailand 2 (Sampan Kesi 38, Korrawit Tasa 78)
DPR Korea 1 (Kang Kuk-chol 45)

Group C

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Korea Republic	3	2	1	0	7	3	4	7
Australia	3	1	2	0	4	3	1	5
Jordan	3	1	1	1	4	5	-1	4
Vietnam	3	0	0	3	3	7	-4	0

19/10/18
Vietnam 1 (Nham Manh Dung 21) Jordan 2 (Mohammad Atieh 29, Mohammad Al Zubi 89)
Korea Republic 1 (Jeon Se-jin 52) Australia 1 (Ramy Najjarine 89)

22/10/18
Australia 2 (Angus Thurgate 37, Gbenga Tai Folami 76) Vietnam 1 (Le Van Nam 85)
Jordan 1 (Omar Al Zebdieh 77) Korea Republic 3 (Cho Young-wook 3, Jeon Se-jin 79, Choi Jun 90)

25/10/18
Vietnam 1 (Le Xuan Tu 13) Korea Republic 3 (Cho Young-wook 45 pen, 90+4 pen, Kim Hyun-woo 77)
Australia 1 (Oliver Pufflett 10) Jordan 1 (Omar Al Zebdieh 76)

Group D

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Saudi Arabia	3	3	0	0	6	2	4	9
Tajikistan	3	1	1	1	4	5	-1	4
China	3	1	0	2	2	2	0	3
Malaysia	3	0	1	2	3	6	-3	1

20/10/18
Saudi Arabia 2 (Turki Al Ammar 24, Salem Al Saleem 78) Malaysia 1 (Hadi Fayyadh 88)
Tajikistan 1 (Sharafjo Solehov 77) China 0
23/10/18
China 0 Saudi Arabia 1 (Abdalmohsen Al Qahtani 81)
Malaysia 2 (Hadi Fayyadh 11, Vahdat Hanonov OG 55) Tajikistan 2 (Ehson Panjshanbe 34 pen, Daler Yodgorov 45+1)
26/10/18
Saudi Arabia 3 (Safi Al Zaqarta 65, 70, Faraj Al Ghashayan 73) Tajikistan 1 (Sheriddin Boboev 29)
China 2 (Tao Qianglong 44, Xu Yue58) Malaysia 0

Quarter-Finals

28/10/18
Qatar 7 (Hashim Ali 13, Nasser Al Yazidi 21, Ahmed Suhail 87, Abdulrasheed Umaru 99, 117, Khaled Mansour 106, Yousef Aymen 120) Thailand 3 (Korrawit Tasa 48, Sakunchai Saengthopho 61, Thirapak Prueangna 80)
Japan 2 (Shunki Higashi 40, Taisei Miyashiro 70)
Indonesia 0
29/10/18
Korea Republic 1 (Jeon Se-jin 44) Tajikistan 0
Saudi Arabia 3 (Turki Al Ammar 7, Firas Al Buraikan 50, Saud Abdulhamid 82)
Australia 1 (Nathaniel Atkinson 42)

Semi-Finals

01/11/18
Qatar 1 (Lee Jae-ik 52 OG) Korea Republic 3 (Jeon Se-jin 23, 33, Um Won-sang 45+2)
Japan 0 Saudi Arabia 2 (Turki Al Ammar 29, Khalid Al Ghannam 45+1)

Final

04/11/18
Korea Republic 1 (Cho Young-wook 64 pen) Saudi Arabia 2 (Turki Al Ammar 2, Khalid Al Ghannam 22)



AFC Grassroots Conference Promotes 'Fun Football'

The Asian Football Confederation strengthened its commitment to continue developing grassroots football in Asia after the conclusion of the second AFC Grassroots Conference in Kuala Lumpur in mid-November.

The three-day conference attracted 100 dedicated grassroots representatives from 41 Member Associations (MAs) who share and support the AFC's Vision to ensure that football remains as the most popular sport in Asia.

In his keynote address, AFC Technical Director Andy Roxburgh stressed on the importance of "The Serious Business of Fun Football".

"It is serious business organising and leading fun football and the aim for all grassroots development is to encourage everyone to play. Very, very few play professionally but we have to remember that all top stars were once grassroots players. Grassroots



football is about mass participation – it is football for all," said Roxburgh.

A classic format of 4 versus 4 to encourage more young children to play the sport was also discussed and demonstrated at the conference. It was well received by grassroots representatives as the format is easy to organise and promotes the game at grassroots level.

Hong Kong Football Association Limited Grassroots Football Manager Samuel Oliver Bensley said: "It is fantastic how I have so many ideas from this conference which I can implement in Hong Kong. We don't have many

pitches in Hong Kong so we have to be creative in ways to find a solution.

"That's why the 4 versus 4 format and its variations are great. We have used this format before and will continue to do so with the aim of getting as many players as we can on the pitch."

AFC-UNHRC Programme Concludes

The AFC-UNHCR Programme Phase 2 participants competed in a mini football carnival to mark the closing of the second phase of this highly successful programme in the Malaysian cities of Gombak and Klang in mid-November.

Phase 2 of the football training programme kicked off in September 2018 and concluded with two of the leading students from the Rohingya Education Centre crowned best players.

Both Umar Saddiq and Nur Haliza from the U-10 category were chosen for their dedication to the programme, attending all 11 sessions and having shown the ability to perform on the pitch.

A total of six teams from the Rohingya Education Centre (JREC) in Gombak and Klang played against teams from SK Batu Belah, Bangsar Magic FC and the Name Football Association of Petaling (NFAP) in the U-10, U-12 and U-14 categories.



The tournament kicked off with the U-14 girls team from JREC Klang meeting SK Batu Belah followed by the U-12 boys with JREC Klang playing SK Batu Belah.

Cheered on by their peers, the U-14 boys played the final match of the mini football carnival with NFAP facing JREC Klang before the prize-giving ceremony.

The students from JREC are participants of the AFC-UNHCR partnership forged in June 2017 which provides refugees opportunities through sport and football under the AFC Dream Asia Foundation.

The programme, which began in September 2017, encompasses empowerment, education and social inclusion through sports-related activities.

Both organisations have participated in the project which utilises football as a tool for social development.

The project sees students benefiting from both the health and education components as activities are done both in and out of classroom.

AFC President Makes Historic Visit to DPR Korea

Asian Football Confederation President Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa made his historic first visit to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in late November.

Shaikh Salman met Choe Hwi, the Chairman of DPR Korea State Physical Culture and Sports Guidance Commission, and Ri Ryong-nam, the President of DPR Korea Football Association during his short visit.

During his meeting with Mr Choe and Mr Ri, Shaikh Salman outlined the future development plans of the Confederation and the increased investment in competitions, facilities and technical staff in the next two years.

The AFC President said: "DPR Korea have long been one of Asia's most successful teams in women's age group football and have also won FIFA titles at Under-17 and Under-20 levels. The men's national team have also qualified for the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 in January.

"It was an opportune moment to learn from the

sports community as well as the DPR Korea Football Association on the ways that the AFC can help with their continued development and learn of some of the challenges that they face."

Shaikh Salman also visited the DPR Korea Football Association headquarters and the Pyongyang International Football School.



UAE And Vietnam Win New Awards

The United Arab Emirates and Vietnam won the newly introduced Best Inspiring League and Best Developing League recognitions at the SPIA Conference & Awards 2018 in a grand ceremony held in Bangkok in November.

The new award categories were introduced for the first time in 2018 to reward Asia's best and most promising leagues which were graded in management and administration, financial performance, competition, marketing and promotion and media and communications.

UAE's Pro League under the Inspiring class led the way in the development of its local football league, which also received the AFC's League Development Award in February for its unique project on media training designed for professional players.

"It is a proud day for football in the UAE to receive this prestigious award. In 10 years since turning fully professional and establishing the Pro League Committee, the UAE Pro League has grown from

strength-to-strength and this honour is a recognition of how far football in the country has developed," said Pro League Committee CEO Waleed Ebrahim Al Hosani.

Under the Aspiring category, Vietnam's V.League 1 earned the Best Developing League award over shortlisted nominees India and Indonesia.

President and General Director of Vietnam Professional Football Tran Anh Tu, who received the award said: "I'm humbled to receive this accolade. Football is a very popular sport in our country and we are continuously thinking of new ways to improve the league."



AFC And CIES Create Scholarship Scheme

The Asian Football Confederation will offer outstanding management candidates from their Member Associations a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to study at the world-renowned and unique FIFA Master Programme thanks to a new scholarship scheme.

As part of the AFC's commitment to upskill staff from Asian countries, the AFC has joined forces with the Centre International d'Etude du Sport (CIES) to offer young professionals the chance to study on the FIFA Master International MA in Management, Law and Humanities of Sport, which will be spread across three universities in Europe.

Financed through the AFC's Solidarity Fund, which was announced by the AFC President Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa at the 28th AFC Congress



in Kuala Lumpur on October 31, 2018, the students will begin their studies in September at De Montfort University in Leicester, England, for a module on the Humanities of Sport.

At the start of the New Year, the class moves to Italy to study Sports Management at Milan's SDA Bocconi School of Management. Following completion of this module, the class will transfer to Switzerland where they are taught Sports Law at the University of Neuchâtel for the final module of the year.

After their studies are complete on the FIFA Master, the graduates will then be offered a secondment to work at the AFC Headquarters in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, for a further year so that they can gain practical experience in Asia's governing Confederation.

Female Sports Given Boost In UAE

The message of participation was heard loud and clear by women of all ages across the United Arab Emirates as the AFC's It's My Game initiative travelled to four cities in November to engage and enthuse them with the many opportunities available through sports.

Led by professional UAE national footballers and leading figures from various sports sectors, participants heard panel discussions and shared their inspiring stories in a fun, informal atmosphere that included games and football-related activities.

The final event panel in Sharjah was made up of Houriya Taheri, UAE women's national team coach, Amal Aal Rabee, UAE women's national team player, Latifa Al Suwaidi, Emirati hockey player and Marzena Justyna Kowalczyk, a mother, whose

five daughters play football for the UAE at different levels.

Marzena, who led the discussion in Sharjah, said that sport has played such a huge role in the lives of her daughters, both socially and in terms of education: "My daughters prefer to be out playing sports instead of

in front of computer games.

"Your health should always be number one and sport is very important to this. My daughters play football and many other sports and have made so many friends through this."

AFC General Secretary Dato' Windsor John, added: "Through the events

held in the UAE, the foundations have been laid to encourage further participation and we hope that It's My Game can help create a lasting legacy for female sport in the UAE."

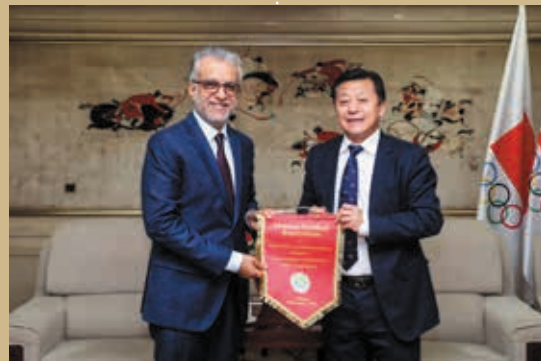


AFC President Backs Football Development In China

AFC President Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa met with H.E. Gou Zhongwen, Minister of General Administration of Sport of the People's Republic of China and President of the National Olympic Committee, in November to discuss the development of the game in the country.

The Chinese Government under the leadership of President H.E Xi Jinping has put football development at the top of the sports agenda in China PR and the AFC President has already committed the AFC to assist in the growth of the game in the country in the coming years.

Shaikh Salman said from the Chinese capital, Beijing: "The meeting with H.E. Gou Zhongwen was important to hear his thoughts on the direction



for football in China PR. The country has stated its ambition to host and win the FIFA World Cup and the AFC is ready to support those aims.

"We have established a Task Force to work closely with the Chinese Football Association (CFA), particularly in the areas of regional development and technical improvement and I look forward to seeing this assistance bring about some excellent results."

H.E Gou expressed his full support for Shaikh Salman and his vision of developing Asian football, and appreciated the close collaboration between the CFA and AFC.

"We thank you for all the support the CFA continues to receive and look forward to achieving our common goals together," he said.

Groundbreaking Ceremony Held In Tehran

AFC President Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa attended the groundbreaking ceremony for the National Centre for Iranian Football in the Islamic Republic of Iran capital, Tehran, in early November.

Shaikh Salman said: "I am delighted to be at this groundbreaking ceremony for the National Centre for Iranian Football and I hope to return in two years' time to open the completed building."

"Iranian football is consistently the leading force in Asia and this building will help them create even stronger national teams – both men and women – in the future. I am particularly pleased that the AFC President's Infrastructure fund has helped finance a new dormitory for women players."

The National Centre for Iranian Football brings together the Headquarters of the Football Federation Islamic Republic of Iran (FFIRI), the Iranian League, the futsal development, women's football and the national academy on one complex close to the Azadi Stadium.

FFIRI President Mehdi Taj thanked the AFC President for attending the ceremony and said: "This centre is extremely important for football in our country. Before all the various offices and centres were scattered across Tehran and now we will all gather in one place."

Under the AFC President's Infrastructure Programme, the women's three-floor dormitory

will be built at the National Football Centre which will provide more than 40 rooms and other facilities for around 70 players.



MOHAMMED BIN ZAYED STADIUM

ABU DHABI, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Home to UAE Pro League side Al Jazira, Mohammed bin Zayed Stadium is one of the United Arab Emirates' pre-eminent sporting hubs. Built in 1979, the capital's oldest football stadium saw a complete overhaul that lasted three years between 2006 and 2009.

Upon its reopening, the stadium's capacity was increased from 15,000 to 42,000. Centrally located in Abu Dhabi's Al Muroor district, the premises at Al Jazira Club include a hospital, a boutique-style hotel and an Olympic-sized swimming pool. Over the past ten years, Mohammed bin Zayed Stadium has hosted the FIFA Club World Cup on three occasions, in 2009, 2010 and 2017. The venue was also home



of the UAE national team in their 2018 FIFA World Cup qualifying campaign. At the prestigious AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 in January, Mohammed bin Zayed Stadium will play host to four group stage matches, one Round of 16 tie, one quarter-final and one semi-final, with some of the continent's finest players to take to the field at Abu Dhabi's second biggest stadium.



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Hello Tomorrow



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**“At the AFC Asian
Cup UAE 2019,
we will witness
the Continent’s
greatest players
and teams at the
very peak of their
performance
deliver moments
that will live long
in the memory.”**

**Shaikh Salman bin
Ebrahim Al Khalifa
AFC President**
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